



# THE DEAD SHALL WALK THE EARTH

Volume 1

Short stories from *No More Room in Hell*

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# Memories of a Survivor

by naveninja

Today I leave this place. This home, this fort, this collection of memories and pain. Had I been able to ask myself a few months ago what he would've thought about leaving, he'd have laughed at me, shook his head dismissively and said, "You'll never make it."

That self-doubt was something that plagued me for a long time. The idea that I couldn't survive on my own, in the open and outside the confines of the stone walls that comprised this bunker, without anyone to help me, kept me here for a lot longer than it should've. Because now I know that it's a lie I invented to project onto other people, one that I kept forcing on myself. I didn't need anyone else, never did, and don't now, not to survive. Because I was the best. Better than them.

Better than anyone.

It was always a bit of a joke amongst my friends and I back before things went wrong. That I carried around that book, read it like one reads a bible, heeding its advice and committing every single detail to memory. That I sought out each film, even the worst and oldest ones, and watched them over and over, enjoying them immensely, yet learning and listening. I knew all the rules, all the tips, all the tricks. I even researched outside the genre, learning from actual survival guides and accounts on the internet.

My friends, the greatest an antisocial teen in this age can have, always said that when the outbreak began, when the news stations started to report on the death tolls and the infections springing up across the world, that they would find me, and stay with me, and do everything I told them, because of my borderline fanaticism. I would simply smile and humbly shrug and say, "Well, if you want to survive, that's the key."

How wrong I was. But honestly, how could I know? How could any of us have known? For me, the outbreak was a day I both dreaded, and anticipated. I wanted it to happen, I wanted my reality to change. I didn't want to continue life the way it had been. I was foolish and stupid, stubbornly clinging onto the discontent I felt when faced with future prospects: college, a job, retirement, death. How nice those things seem now. But back then, I wanted none of it. I wanted zombies to be real, I wanted all the useless and pathetic knowledge I had spent endless hours acquiring, through all the video games and movies and books, I wanted it to amount to something useful and epic, where nothing mattered anymore except survival and being the ultimate zombie-killing badass and hero.

Wish fucking granted you goddamn child.

And now I sit, taking in the last sunrise from the top of this place, this place I came to call my home, my fortress of solitude and monument to surviving the end of the world. That's what it was about, originally: surviving at all costs. I remember the early days, when it

reached my ears that it was beginning. Never before had my phone buzzed with so many texts and calls. I was flying around my room, my television was tuned to the news, my computer had multiple windows and tabs with all the up-to-date information I could find, videos from the internet were playing on my laptop and my phone was the center of my communication.

The day had come. It had finally, against all possible odds, come. The undead were upon us, and I was busy learning everything I could in the short timeframe I knew I would have before I would have to leap into action. I coordinated with my friends and their families, not all were able to make it, but as many as we could met in a designated location. The panic hadn't quite reached my hometown, but I knew it probably wouldn't be long.

In my high school days, my friends and I often shared discussions about all manner of things. Of course, one of recurring topical trends, especially when I was around, was what would you do in a zombie apocalypse? Where would you go, what would you bring? I had a contingency plan already lined up. A bunker, not far from one of my friend's property. We found it one day when we were off playing: abandoned, no signs of ownership or care, with plants growing in through broken windows, dusty and empty.

For two years we fixed it up as best we could, furnished it with old furniture and cleaned out the weeds and cobwebs and bee nests. It was our fort, our place where we hung out, stored naughty magazines, played war with pretend guns. It was the place of our contingency plan, the location where we would go if it ever happened. It was in the countryside, hidden by a circle of trees, well away from any roads and with plenty of open space around it. It checked out on all accounts.

On that day when we met, my friends (those who could come) and their families (also those who could make it, including my own) went to the fort. They brought food, televisions, sleeping bags, jugs of water (at my request) and other useful things. In the days before the city became dangerous, we were able to purchase a lot of things: wooden planks, tools, doors, reinforcements and fence wiring. Our parents listened to us, which was nice. They believed us when we told them of the danger, and showed them proof. Some major cities had already fallen, which was enough to convince the majority of them.

Those early days were crowded. That was the one thing I didn't like: too many people. The problem only got worse as others started to pour in: distant friends, cousins, uncles, aunts, their families... it was maddening. There simply wasn't enough room. The bunker had two floors and a basement, with over eight rooms, but even then it wasn't enough. People started setting up tents around it, sleeping in their cars, making large bonfires and keeping their car lights on throughout the night, playing music, among other stupid, suicidal things.

I should've seen it coming, or rather, I did. People can be their own worst enemy, and cooperation amongst our kind isn't easy. I tried to talk to people, to get them to move on

or take a more active role in helping fortify our surroundings, but when faced with complete strangers, people I had no connection with, they had no reason to listen to me. They thought I was just some kid. The only people I could effectively give orders to were my friends, because they believed in me. But soon, their parents, and my father, tried to take a more dominant role and enforce rules on all the others who were showing up.

Predictably, sides were drawn. Some fights broke out here and there as the days moved on. Some people felt they had more of a right to sleep in the fort than us, even if we were the ones who had been here first, even long before the outbreak. Nobody on the outside recognized our sovereignty on the fort; after all, we were just teens, barely young adults. Others felt that there should be a cycle, where some people got to be inside on certain days of the week. I knew that wouldn't work; that once some people were entitled to sleep inside, they weren't going to give it up.

It was so frustrating seeing it all spiral downwards and having no impact on what was going on. It wasn't supposed to be like this. If people would've just listened to those who knew what was actually going on and what was worth fighting for, then maybe... Probably not. It would've happened anyway, they would've eventually reached us. All the lights and loud music were like a beacon, a dinner bell. I'm just glad that when it finally happened, those who knew what to do were ready.

They came in the night. They always do, it seems, at least in big groups. I'll never forget the sight: the first time I ever saw an actual horde of them coming for us, moaning. My blood ran cold, my breathing faltered, and I felt... exhilarated. It was time, truly time to put all the preparation to the test. I immediately went about organizing my friends, waking them up. Screams filled the air as the undead easily overran the outer perimeter of the bunker, tearing into tents and dragging people down. Gunshots rang out, cars started driving. Two crashed into each other, and before the drivers could back up, the walkers had already pulled them out of their cars, kicking and shouting.

People were running, some were trying to climb up onto the bunker's higher wall. The father of one of my friends kicked a man off. It was chaos, pure, unbridled chaos... and through it all, I was shouting orders. My friends listened, and their parents followed their lead, dropping all notions of maintaining control. At least until the zombies were gone. It took less than an hour for the camp below to be completely deserted, its occupants either dead or run off. The zombies surrounded the lower levels of the fort, unable to get in once we had sealed shut the main entrance. The metal doors had turned out to be our greatest investment.

We spent some time looking down at them, watching them as their arms reached for us, broken nails scratching the stone wall, moans filling the air and our ears. Dead, pale skin with lifeless, white orbs in their eye sockets looked up at us, their mouths agape and aching to dig into our flesh, conveying their desire to fulfill their never-ending hunger for the meat of men.

We waited until dawn, so we could have light. That first night with them outside wasn't very fun, or easy. Their constant moaning had a psychological effect with prolonged exposure, I knew this fact, so we tried to cover our ears with any means we could: headphones playing music, pillows, anything. I, on the other hand, stayed along the upper wall, looking down at them with a morbid fascination, shining lights in their faces. I remember seeing a man I knew among them, but not very well. I was sorry for him.

Morning came. We killed them. Picked them off one-by-one from the upper wall, and once none were standing, we exited the bunker and finished them all off, any who were still alive, trapped underneath something or crawling around, and those who were recently turned. I shouted and warned everyone to be wary of remaining cars or tall grass. Sure enough, some ex-survivors were trapped in their cars, shackled inside thanks to their seatbelts. At least two were lying face down in tall grass, their motor functions damaged by bullets.

Putting on rubber gloves, we dragged them into a nearby ditch we had dug for this very purpose, far away enough for the smell not to reach us, and we tossed in all the bodies, lit them on fire, and didn't turn back. It was difficult for some of the remaining survivors; few of those amongst the dead were loved ones that didn't make it into the fort. We said some prayers, some of the others held a small service, and we moved on.

Now, we were alone. Now, we had what I had truly wanted. We worked together on all tasks, like moving the cars and cleaning up the grounds from the recent attack. When more zombies came, never in the large amount that they had at first, we handled them with expert coordination and teamwork. What food we had left was dwindling, however, and the water too. Among those problems, discontent was settling within some of the adults.

As time went on, things started to get depressing for some of the others. Some wanted to leave, to find family or go somewhere they felt would be safer. Television and computers didn't work, no antennae or satellite connection. Internet couldn't be reached, so laptops weren't useful. Phones still worked, though, so we were able to get a decent idea of what was going on from outside contacts. I didn't like the idea of talking to others on the outside, because of one of two things: either they would want to come here, or they would convince others to leave.

The latter happened. Two families left, those of my friends Matt and Logan. I was saddened to see them go, but I wasn't going to leave. My father, on the other hand, had other ideas. He felt it was a good idea to go, but I wouldn't hear any of it. I was convinced that this place would guarantee safety, and I was right. My old man, out of respect for me, stayed. Or maybe I had actually convinced him. Hard to say.

We started to ration out our supplies. Rain didn't come often, but we always made sure to get enough of it as he could from empty pans and jugs. As for food, we knew that couldn't last forever. Thankfully, one of my friends had enough sense to buy lots and lots of military -style dehydrated food and other similar meals. They became a godsend.

It was two weeks before the first confirmed death among our own hit us. My friend Chris lost his mother when she went out to go to the bathroom. A crawler bit her, and that was that. Chris became the first of us to know what it is like to murder a loved one. He became very quiet after that, a stark opposite to his normally very cheery disposition. He and his brother, Jordan, coped in their own ways.

Not long after that, Tony's sister died. Suicide, with a pistol. The shot woke up everyone in the night. I didn't know her well, but she seemed the quietest of the bunch of us. I suppose it simply got to her. Her death forced Tony's mother to leave out of grief, forcing him to choose between his mother and us. I don't know why, but he chose us. He made one comment, that he never liked his mother much, and the subject never came up afterwards. But I knew that wasn't the real justification. We never argued about the choice, but I knew his thinking was pragmatic, like my own. He wanted to survive as much as I did, he was as selfish as I was. He didn't think his mother would make it. I can't say I disagreed with him.

Months came and went. Infrequently, we lost more people. Some to zombie attacks, others from leaving. But no matter what happened, my friends stayed alive, even as their families died or left them. I was convinced it was because we were faster, more informed, perhaps even more lucky, but I knew none of us were truly fortunate. The survivors have to deal with the dead, a pain greater than any wound.

I learned that lesson the day my father turned. Bless him, he had hidden a bite and didn't want to alarm anyone. Out of pride, he resolved to continue helping us. He ate less and less, spent more time alone. The last conversation we had was a short one. He spoke of my mother, and how proud she would be of the man I had grown into, and asked me to survive, no matter what. Confused, I asked him why he was speaking of such a thing. He told me the truth, and God help me, I couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to kill him.

A mistake I would never make again. He turned, and killed my friend Steven when he opened the door of the room I had sealed my father into, before I could warn him not to open it. I killed my father, or rather, my father's corpse, and fell to the ground, defeated.

Some of my friends don't like their fathers. Ryan, or David, had issues. Others were indifferent. But I... I loved my father. He was a good man, honorable, practical, honest. Not rich, not poor, content to work from day to day and provide for his only son. He was always stoically silent when reflecting painful memories, like that of my mother, buried long ago in a cemetery far away. He wasn't meant to die like this. He deserved better, and through my mistakes, one of my dearest friends, a person who was like a younger brother to me, had paid the ultimate price. I failed him, and I failed my father, not able to kill him before he turned.

But I knew, through my pain and tears, that I had to move on, that others depended on me. I buried them both with help from the others. Two graves, with wooden crosses. "Dan" and "Steven" were carved into the horizontal plank.

I changed afterwards. Noticeably, if the others are to be believed. From then on, I became cold. Calculating. Quiet, except for when I needed to talk. I now knew that before, I wasn't obsessed with survival. I was merely prepared for it. Now, it consumed me. Nobody questioned me anymore when I gave orders, not that they often had, but now it was without hesitation. When the zombies came, I almost always insisted on killing them myself.

And I became good at it. With practice, and help from the others, I could lead a team into heavily infected territory and come out clean. And just in time, too, as the food and water ran out. We started organizing raids on the nearby city, gathering supplies. Food, water, ammo, gasoline, anything we could get our hands on and load into the truck. We would always take the long way back home, purposefully leading any zombies that followed us out of the city in the wrong direction.

Things were good, and my kill count was high. But I should've known it wouldn't last forever. On one of our trips out, Jordan made a mistake and it cost him his life. He tripped, and got bitten. We dragged him into the car and drove home, forgoing the usual route. Chris couldn't kill his brother, so I did. We noted his last words, he had some nice things to say about all of us, before I ended it. We buried him and gave him a grave which read "Jay."

It was around that time Matt returned to us. He told a tale of where he had been, a military checkpoint, that it was eventually overrun and how he escaped and how his parents didn't. Without a phone, he wasn't able to call any of us. Yet, with his own wit and intelligence and skill, he had made it back. We were glad he had returned, even though he had come in the wake of death, and that death would come in the wake of him.

Since we hadn't taken the usual route back, a large horde found us. It was the longest siege we had ever faced, and we couldn't kill them fast enough. They piled body upon body and scaled our walls, standing on their own dead. We lost Ryan that day. The crazy son-of-a-bitch lit himself on fire after he had been bitten and leapt off the wall, into the crowd, roasting a large amount of them as they swarmed over him to eat him, unable to feel the pain of the fire or recognize the danger it posed to them.

The only other person we lost that day was Jacob, the weakest of us physically, yet a moral anchor. He was smart, and caring, and more like a psychologist than a survivalist. He had been with us, alone, since the beginning, not knowing if his parents survived or not. He never got the chance to learn, as he was caught in a hall between two zombies. We got to him and killed them just as he breathed his last breaths, asking us to kill him.

It was the second time I shot a friend. Tony offered to do it for me, but I denied him, saying that it was better if only one of us had to live with it.

There were only six of us now. We killed the remaining undead, burned their bodies, and made graves for Ryan and Jacob. We didn't have anything to bury for Ryan, so we put



into his grave a few pictures we had of him from inside our wallets. We said some words, and I put in that he had amazing courage to do what he had to have done. "He dragged those fuckers with him right to hell," Matt added.

For Jacob, all I could say was that he was among the best of us. An artist who wanted to draw comics, a person who would always wait for others and help in any way he could. During our friendship, I often let him down, and sometimes, abused him. But I always valued and treasured his friendship, even if it was hard for me to show it, and wished I was more like him in many ways.

Things got quiet for a while. Small pockets of the dead would come, and we would kill them. It became like a routine, and we all grew distant from each other. I think each of us were trapped in a prison of our own making, isolated and trying to cope with the horrible reality of what life had become.

Perhaps now is a good time to talk about a quality I seem to possess that many do not: strength. I don't mean physical strength, but of character. Of coping, dealing with terrible pain, in the past and present. I'm not saying that what I've experienced is any worse than what others have gone through, I'm merely stating that I seem to be able to deal with distress better than most. The worst things ever got for me were the times my friends died, or my father, or my mother, yet somehow, I was always able to come back, even stronger than before. In the times before everything changed, I was a listener. It suited me. I listened to my friends and their issues. None were worse than David.

I won't go into incredible detail, but David was one of my greatest friends, and Steven's elder brother. He had been kicked around by the word in so many ways... a terrible accident with a farming combine leaving part of him scarred and deformed, girlfriends leaving him, an abusive home... that he became at once the most sensitive and dismissive of us all. He shared an affinity with Ryan, both coming from similar backgrounds and having similar father issues, and he loved his brother very much. David went on a lot longer than I thought he would before he reached his breaking point and ended it.

He had teased suicide in the past. We had an intervention for him once. But now, he truly did it, and worst of all, he died alone. I'll never forgive myself for not seeing the signs early enough, for not being able to stop him. With his last remaining anchors to the world gone, he took a length of rope and left us and the cruel world that had fostered him behind. He left a note that said he was sorry. A small bit at the end was directed at me, saying that he would miss our arguments.

Another day, another grave.

About two weeks passed before we were hit again, but not by zombies. By people. Among them were some that had been driven from the makeshift camp during the earliest days of our survival. I never got to ask them any questions, but I like to think that they went off, found another group, and convinced them to help them come back and kill us and take the fort for themselves, like they had always wanted.

They blew open the front door with some kind of bomb. I never saw what kind, if it was homemade or military-grade. It worked, I'll give them that. They had guns, but so did we. It became a standoff. The fort was our protection, however, we had home field advantage. They couldn't chase us in without one of us firing on them. They lost four men that way. Playing on the defensive, we were ready to let them siege us. We took potshots at their cars, threw homemade explosives at them. Killed a couple. We were starting to break their morale and victory was within our hopes, then they shot and killed two of us: Chris and Greg.

Three of us were left. Matt, Tony, and myself. I knew they outnumbered us with a factor of three to one, I knew that we couldn't last forever, and I knew that we needed help. The three of us agreed on a plan, deciding to enact one of our more desperate contingencies. We recovered some fireworks, once, during one of our journeys into the city. Not little firecrackers, either, but big ones. We waited until dusk and set them off one at a time, knowing that those undead bastards would see and hear them.

Reinforcements came quicker than expected. Much quicker.

The zombies weren't supposed to run. Goddamnit, they weren't supposed to run. I don't know what changed, and I'll probably never know, but all the same, goddamnit, they weren't supposed to run.

Like before, the undead swarmed our besiegers, only this time, none escaped. Once done, they ran through the open door of our bunker.

Matt, Tony and I were the best of all of us when it came to fighting the undead. And I was the best of the three of us. When they overran our defenses and made it the second level, I told them that it had been an honor to survive with them. They looked at me, seeing that I was prepared for death, and they agreed.

We fought. These zombies were more ferocious, faster and much more determined to kill us, but still we fought. One at a time we killed them, unable to see what was happening to the other two, as they came at us relentlessly.

My gun ran out of ammo. My blade became an extension of my arm, chopping, hacking, slashing, stabbing. I backed up very slowly as bodies piled up in front of me. These monsters had taken everything from me: my home, my friends, my father and my emotions. And now they were going to take my life. But I sure as hell wasn't going to go down without a fight. I ignored whatever pain I felt from exhaustion, I disregarded everything around me: I only focused on killing.

On and on they came, their moans invading my ears and attempting to dull my senses, to demoralize me. It wasn't going to work. It was the longest, hardest, greatest fight of my life, and when it was over, when none came, I stood for a long while, expecting others to

come running at me. None did. I blinked, and allowed myself to breathe long, slow, painful breaths.

It was over. And I was alone. Tony and Matt were dead, given the release I was denied. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to shove my goddamn machete right through my skull. I fell to my knees and let out a shout, a veritable roar of anguish, hoping that some zombie that remained would hear it and come running. It was my weakest moment, when I realized I was truly alone. I wanted it to end, but that end never came. The utter disparity and total fatigue I felt overwhelmed me and I fell asleep amongst the corpses and woke up with a pain in my neck from leaning on it crooked.

It was my first day alone.

Amongst the dead zombies, I discovered something that surprised me. Logan. He was one of the dead Tony had cut down. I wondered what happened to him since he left, and how Tony felt when he saw Logan. Maybe he didn't recognize him. I didn't at first, as part of his jaw was missing. Didn't matter now. Out of respect for my old friend, I buried him with the others, before doing the same with Greg, Chris, Matt and Tony.

At the end of the day I had a real nice line of shallow graves, eleven in total. Each with a wooden cross moniker that had their names etched into it. It took another day to dispose of the remaining bodies, burning them all with the some gasoline from the back of one of the trucks our attackers had driven up in.

Any remaining undead I found, buried beneath bodies or otherwise hidden, I killed. It was all simple business for me. Any zombies that came here, I killed. I ate my meals, reinforced the perimeter, did what I could to clean up and repair the fort. A gift for whoever would find this place after I was gone. I went about my work silently, in a methodical nature, like a small ant scurrying about, tiding up the hole he lives in.

I sat in my room, looking down at my gun, which I had placed on the table in front of me. For a long time, I thought about turning it on myself, doing what some others had done before me. I wished I was dead, but I couldn't bring that upon myself. In spite of everything, I had survived. Only me. The others were strong in their own right, but none of them were like me. I found that I felt that they were luckier than I, and that I hated being alive. I envied them.

In that moment, I came to a decision. My doubt was gone, and I knew what I was going to do. I had always known that, no matter what I did, where I went or who I would become, I would someday die. I knew that I would never take my own life, because it's something I'm not capable of. And I knew that I was never going to let those zombies turn me, that I would never become one of their numbers.

I think, the thing I hate the most about them, the thing I find to be the most beautiful thing about them at the same time, is how simple they are. They all want one thing, and will stop at nothing to get it. They have no intentional teamwork or leadership, no morals

or higher ambitions. They will dog you to the ends of the earth, never stopping, never faltering, never losing their hunger. Lock them up for years and let them out and they'll still be hungry. They know no pain, no fear, no mercy, no remorse, nothing. Their numbers swell while your numbers thin, because you are their reinforcements. Every human who is not completely devoured will become one of them, a mindless husk, a walking corpse. No individuals, no celebrities, no politicians or military to speak of, only zombies.

The simplicity extends to the virus that turns them, the simple way it can survive and thrive. One zombie is all it takes to destroy the world of man. And as I learned from all my experiences leading up to this moment, one man can destroy every zombie in existence. Unlikely, sure. Impossible? No. How many more zombies could I kill before my luck finally ran out? How many before I make one little mistake and get bitten? How many before I am finally taken by surprise?

As many as I could, until I was stopped. Nothing else would matter. It was no longer about my own survival, it was about stopping them. Every zombie killed would be a chance for a brighter future. I decided to block out the logical and intelligent reasoning in my head that argued that no matter what I did, nothing would matter when only one zombie could create ten, and those ten could create ten, and so on and so forth. That no matter how many I killed, more would take their place, and I couldn't take on the world.

I ignored my reason, blocked out my self-serving survival nature, and decided to leave this place. I knew I couldn't stay even if I wanted to. Despite what strength I had left, this fort, once a place of fun and games, then protection, then imprisonment, then pain, was too hard for me to stay in. But I had some goodbyes to make.

I stopped by each grave and had a few things to say. To each one I spoke of our friendship, of defining moments in our time together, moments lost to history but ones I would never forget. I knew then that it was up to me to keep their memory alive, to always remember and respect them. I apologized to each one for not being able to protect them. I realized that I was leaving each of them behind, and in doing so, were leaving behind parts of my soul.

Matt was almost like a brother of mine, a man who exemplified friendship. Logan was hopeful, a man who could smile through tears. David was sensitive when fought with, yet our arguments and rival-like mentality defined our friendship. Ryan had honor, and in the end, was willing to sacrifice himself just to give us a better fighting chance. Chris was my intellectual equal, a man who shared many of my hobbies and passions. Tony was intelligent as well, yet slightly neurotic, though that quality gave way in the face of his friendship. Steven, one of the youngest among us, was innocent to the end, and the closest thing I had to a younger brother, even though he was already this for David. Greg was one of my oldest friends, quick with a joke and always ready to violently and loyally defend his friends. Jacob was smart, kind and sensitive, with high dreams and ambitions, always defiant in the face of adversity. Jordan was strong, determined and proud, and though I often treated him unfairly, I always respected him.

And my father, Dan, who was the greatest influence on me of all. He taught me about so much, merely by being himself. It is because of him that I am the person I am today, driven by desire to keep alive the memory of every single person within these graves, to survive no matter what.

Brotherhood. Hope. Sensitivity. Honor. Intelligence. Friendship. Innocence. Loyalty. Kindness. Respect. Survival.

In that moment, I found strength I had never known in the memory of my friends and loved ones. All of those qualities found a home within me, and once more I was free from the darkness that had threatened to swallow me whole. The pain was still great, yet now I could finally live with it. Tears flowed freely down my face, and I found I was able to smile. It didn't matter that I was the only one left, what mattered was because I was the last survivor, they gave me the strength to live on, even if I faced a future without them.

I'm going to leave this place now. I took a little while to take in each room. The bunks, the dining room, the storeroom, the kitchen, recreation room, the bathroom stall out back... I left everything as it is. I couldn't bring myself to touch or ruin anything, to remove any little hints of the people who once inhabited these halls. Small words etched into the walls, posters, personal items... I only left my room empty, save for this small journal.

I leave this account of myself behind, for someone else to find. Maybe learn something. I wish you luck, I do. I don't intend to return, but there are a few places I would like to see again. A small playground outside an old school. A field and a big, big hill where I used to go sledding in the winter. The site of my childhood home, before it burnt down. There's a new house there. I'd like to go to my grandparent's house, where I lived for years afterwards. I'd like to take one last walk down a few roads in my small home town, visit a couple houses that belonged to old friends. I'd like to take a long walk to a bar and restaurant that my father used to own out in the countryside, a place I visited often when I was a child.

I'd like to visit the graveyard right next to it, and see my mother one last time, and apologize that dad wasn't able to be buried next to her like they had always planned. Tell her about the things I've done and seen, and wish her well until I see her again.

And after that...

I'll do the only thing I can do.

Survive... and remember.

And kill as many zombies as I can.

# 4:32 A.M.

by Dax

I'm not sure how long I've been in this supply closet. While not a janitor, I now consider myself an expert on the ingredients and labeled use of 32 different cleaners. But I suppose I'll explain how I got here. It all started at 4:32AM this morning.

My cellphone's shrill tone startled me out of sleep. Typically I would have checked the caller ID, seen the call was coming from work and promptly ignored it. Unfortunately in my groggy state I unwittingly answered it.

"Jake, I'm sorry to call you so early."

It was Stan, my boss. I blinked hard trying to focus my eyes on the bright red characters of my bedside clock. Jesus... 4:32AM?

"Yea... er what, uh... what's up?" I managed to get out.

"Half of everyone called off today. Mixers, security, accounting. You name it, they called off. Been that way all week. You have to come in and spin this. I have to meet with the board at 8 today and I need a marketing rep to make this seem, uh, better or something?"

I could tell by his voice he was extremely stressed. Lately, with the riots and general level of doom and gloom in the air, I could understand where Stan was coming from.

"Yeah, OK. So I guess I should--"

He cut me off. "Great! See you in 30!" Then he hung up.

Great. I suppose it wasn't that big of a deal, coming in a couple hours early. I rolled out of bed and got ready to go. I'd worked at BioMed as a marketing manager since I graduated college and it was on its way to becoming a Fortune 500 company. We specialized in insulin production, and were working on new and exciting ways to culture antibiotics. It used to be an easy going job, until that 9/11 business. Now we were regulated by the Department of Homeland Security. All manner of new security requirements, clearances, etc.

I wiped down my fog filled mirror. At 39, I was already seeing some grey. That's OK. Women dig the "experienced" look now, I'm told. I got dressed in my usual morbid attire. Black tie, white shirt. My secretary said I looked like a Mormon or a mortician. I grabbed my briefcase, and charged out the door.

The start of the drive to work was uneventful. At this time in the morning, not even a pair of headlights greeted me as I drove down the desolate suburban street. The serenity was shattered as I made a turn to get on a main road and four police cars nearly ran into me as they flew past on the wrong side of the road. I swerved to miss them going slightly on the shoulder.

Well that woke me up. As I watched them in my rear view mirror, I realized they were probably responding to more "civil unrest" downtown. It was becoming more and more common,

especially in the last few weeks. Every day you'd hear about someone attacking someone, or more recently groups attacking people.

I pulled up to the gate at BioMed. Now there was a finger print and a card scanner before the menacing metal gates would roll open. I felt like I was driving into a prison. The screech of the gears pulling the fence open always hurt my ears. I noticed the guard shack was empty, too. I rolled into the parking lot and began the half-sleep stumble through the glass doors and into the ornate lobby. It was a beautiful green marble floor, with two towering posts that lead to a golden colored elevator door.

"Good morning, Mr.Bechtle!" Franklin, the third shift guard called out. "You're in awful early, today!"

"Yes, Franklin, unfortunately I am," I muttered.

"Looks like most the staff called off. We're running on skeleton crew tonight," he added, as I walked towards the elevator.

"Well I hope there is at least someone here to make some coffee," I joked while entering the elevator. The doors shut behind me and I proceeded to Floor 3: Administration.

As the doors opened, I was greeted with a poorly lit hallway. I hadn't seen it this way before, because I never cared to venture into work this early. When I stepped off, the motion sensors kicked the lights on, segment by segment as I walked down the hall to Stan's office. I heard some light typing and some far off voices, but the fans they keep on for background noise drowned most of them out. It was a massive cubical farm as far as the eye can see. How strange to see the floor so empty.

I walked up to Stan's office and saw the door was open, and Stan was busily moving paper between his printer and fax machine. I stood there for a second, chuckling at the myriad of curse words coming out of his mouth regarding documents getting stuck in his printer queue when he looked up and saw me.

"Jake, thank God! Sit down."

I pulled up a chair and propped my feet up on his desk, as I often did and waited for him to continue.

"Ok so here's the situation. Right now, just judging by my inbox, we're going to have MAYBE 1/3rd of our staff today. We'll have at most two mixers, a couple of packagers, a couple of sales reps, you, and of course me. That's it. I need you to work with sales, use some of your delaying tactics that you use with me all the time--"

"Whoa Stan! I don't use delaying tactics with you. They're more like deadline negotiation points," I interjected as he rolled his eyes.

"Yea, well OK. But at any rate, get the board off my back. Find industry trends or whatever it is you do to suggest our competition is in the same boat. Give me something to give to them to make this situation look less awful than it is."

"Gotcha Stan. No problem." I got up and Stan resumed his profanity filled monologue regarding his printer.

I walked over to the vending area only to be disappointed that no one had made any coffee. I opted to not make any myself so that the next person to walk in could feel the same anguish. Once in my dark office I sat down and moved my mouse. My monitor slowly came to life, illuminating all my various degrees and accomplishments tacked to my wall. I opened my inbox and discovered Stan wasn't kidding. Our HR automated line immediately notifies supervisors via email when an employee in my team calls off. My inbox was packed full of such notifications. There was a flu going around, and the sporadic riots were keeping a lot of people off the streets, particularly our female employees. But this was the worst I'd seen it.

Because I knew time was of the essence, I finished my ongoing game of solitaire from the day before as fast as possible then began work. I opened a chat client to see if any of my friends from inside the industry might be able to clue me into our competition's status. Only one person was online and not idle, a friend of mine from college who worked with General Electric's medical sector. I started the conversation bluntly.

**JBechtle10 5:08AM:** So, I'm fucking at work at this ungodly hour, because every asshole in the company called off. How are things in your neck of the woods?

**Dave.Hailey 5:09AM:** Not good. I'm sick as hell myself, and I heard through the grape-vine at least half of our day shift already called in.

**JBechtle10 5:11AM:** Well at least the board won't eat me alive when I tell them everyone is fucked. Thanks Dave. Gotta run.

I logged out to avoid being drawn into some "catching up" conversation. After drafting a bunch of garbage in Microsoft Word where I pretended to have a grasp of the situation, I started to email it to Stan when the power went out. Real funny.

The emergency lights kicked on momentarily, then the power fluttered back on. Most likely our backup generators warming up. I picked up the phone to call Stan, only to find out I had no tone, and couldn't access any of the lines internal or external. I pulled out my cell phone, as I was too lazy to simply walk down the hall and discovered the network was down, as well.

I debated sitting there and seeing if some sort of magical creature would appear to retype my situation report, but after giving it another 10 minutes it seemed as though I might be on my own. I got up and walked into the hall to venture down to Stan's office when I heard what sounded like buffalo stampeding behind me. Three grey uniformed clad security officers were running past. The last one turned, pointed in my office and said "Get in your office and shut your door." He then ran and caught up with the others.

Any excuse to not finish my work was satisfactory to me, so I walked back into my office and closed the door, just as ordered. Admittedly, I was a little concerned. This hadn't happened before. It's also the first time I've seen the armed part of our security team out and about. Perhaps a disgruntled coworker, or maybe a fire or something. Telling me to stay in my office during a fire seems unprofessional. Whatever. No reason to let my mind wander.



About ten minutes passed when I heard an alarm. It wasn't the fire alarm, which I was forced to endure as a test once a month. This was some sort of high pitched whine. I could hear metallic clicking in the thin walls; it sounded like metal doors shutting or something. Unfortunately, as a middle manager, I had no outside window in my office, but I did have a glass wall that gave me a beautiful view of the cube farm outside. Through it, I did manage to see something odd. Two security officers were carrying a desk through the middle of the room. A big desk. And they definitely had a sense of urgency about them. I peeked as far as I could, but they disappeared around a corner.

Another long 10 or 15 minutes passed when Stan came chugging down the corridor towards my office. I unlocked the door and he walked in, out of breath.

"Phew... wasn't sure if I was supposed to come out into the hall yet so I wanted to make it here fast."

"What's going on, Stan?"

"I'm not sure. This gets me out of the board meeting though!" We both admitted it was a welcome occurrence and laughed it off.

I asked if he had noticed any of the guards carrying around desks, and he had. It was odd to see a security presence at all on the Administration floor, much less the armed members.

After a while Stan and I decided to take a look around. We hadn't seen any guards in the better part of an hour, and our small talk was getting old. I took the lead and walked into the dark hallway. The motion detectors again kicked in, illuminating a short path in front of me. It was extraordinarily creepy, as this was a long hallway, and the lights were only showing me about 25 feet ahead, the rest was a wall of black. As we made our way forward, the lights popped on one by one, until we reached the stairwell. Here, we discovered where the desks were going. The guards had piled them up, blocking the stairway.

"Well, that's damn peculiar," Stan said.

"Let's move around and get some more of these lights on," I nervously replied.

We each took a different path, and in a few minutes most the floor was lit again. I felt marginally more comfortable. I asked Stan where the guards had gone, and Stan motioned towards the end of the hall.

"They went to the elevator."

"Honestly, Stan, I think maybe we should stay here a bit. It's possible there's an office shooter or something. They didn't block the door for fun."

Stan agreed, and we retreated back to my office.

Roughly an hour later, we again heard the heavy boots of security approaching my office.

"Sirs, we need you to come with us to the cafeteria."

Stan spoke first. "What is going on?"

The guard looked confused himself and simply replied "It's a security situation. Please come with me."

After a couple more vaguely answered questions, we decided it was pointless to try and press the guard further and we reluctantly followed him to the elevator.

On the fancy touchpad screen inside the elevator itself, I noticed the lobby floor option had large, red font letters across it reading "LOCKED." The guard pressed Floor 1 and we slowly came down. The elevator, being a two sided car, separated the lobby from the employee lounge area. By selecting Floor 1, the rear doors would open, leaving the front lobby facing side doors closed. This, I suppose, is a security measure as well, separating the public area of the building from the employee sections.

The doors opened, revealing the walkway through our amenities section. Employees of BioMed have access to a reading room, cafeteria, gym, and other little perks. We quickly passed down the hall. The gym and reading rooms were completely dark as I could see through the windowed walls on either side. We arrived at the cafeteria and I saw probably 15 or more people sitting at tables. Five guards at the front of the room, and two more in the back were talking on their radios. The escorting guard turned to us and pointed towards the kitchen area.

"If you'd like, help yourself to something to eat or drink. We're going to be here a while." He walked off before allowing us to again ask what was going on.

Stan and I, being anti-social, sat off to the end of a table by ourselves, quietly taking in all that was going on around us. No sooner had I been thinking about taking the guard up on the kitchen offer, Gary Holland, our head of security, walked up to the tables and asked for everyone's attention.

"Alright, I know everyone is curious about just what in the world is going on here. I hate to tell you all this, but I don't really know, either."

There were murmurings amongst the seating employees as Gary continued.

"As many of you are aware, BioMed is a member of the Department of Homeland Security's Caution List. As such, we're bound by the protocols the DHS creates, including responding and adhering to any requests they make. Today, around 6:15AM, emergency notices came down the pipe. We were instructed to block all entrances, and doors that couldn't be secured, gather staff in a safe area, and await further instructions. Due to the sensitive nature of our stock and product, they have deemed BioMed a priority and in increasing the terror alert, we were included in the charter to lock down. To speculate, it likely has to do with reports coming out of the local area of more large-scale rioting."

One of the guys from the loading dock took the opportunity to make a crude remark. "So this means we all get to sit around and jerk our dicks for a while until the police get off their asses? Works for me!"

A couple other conversations started but Gary cut them off. "Any way, just sit tight, grab a bite to eat and we'll wait this thing out." Gary walked back towards the other group of guards at the front.

"Fuck it. Let's get something to eat," Stan said, "If it's free. I'll buy yours, too."

We walked over to the counter area. I grabbed a bottle of orange juice and went to hop over to see what other goodies were back there. Suddenly, the two guards from the back ran over to the larger group and said something quietly. Gary waved them over to the hallway and they disappeared behind the door. Gary stayed behind, but looked very concerned as he got on his radio and walked to the back corner of the room.

The other employees had taken notice, and voices started chattering. I noticed Franklin had come into the room from one of the other doors and walked over to Gary.

As the situation appeared to get worse, judging by the subtle panic setting in, the guards returned to the room and rushed over to Gary. They spoke briefly and Gary immediately addressed the cafeteria.

"Ok everyone, CALMLY head back to the elevator. I'll explain when we get up to operations."

Had the cafeteria been more packed, it likely would have resulted in a small disaster. Luckily, 15 BioMed employees are fairly easy to corral and we lined up and walked back to the elevator where a guard held the door. We packed in, but there wasn't enough room for everyone. Two guards remained outside, and two other employees I didn't recognize. Gary spoke to the guard in the back of the elevator.

"Take them up to operations then come down to get the rest. Make sure--"

Gary was cut off by thunderous metallic pounding on the front doors of the elevator. The doors that lead to the lobby. The entire car was shaking with the assault. By the sound, there must have been a hundred people in the lobby.

"Fucking damn it!" Gary shouted. He pulled a woman off the elevator and took her place. Before she had a chance to object, he hit the door close button and then up we went. Not 3 seconds after we started up, we all heard the outer lobby elevator door buckle and slam off its track. As we progressed up, we could hear the unknown assailants pounding on the outer door to the lounge area we had just departed from as they flooded under the elevator to the opposite side.

"Jesus Christ!" someone from the other side of the elevator car yelled. "What the fuck was that? They're going to beat their way into the hallway where those other people were!"

Suddenly it all hit us how close we were to coming face to face with the ne'er-do-wells below us. Panic evolved quickly, and everyone started talking at once. Gary screamed at the top of his lungs.

"SHUT THE HELL UP! Everything is going to be fine. We have protocols in place for just this sort of nonsense. Now calm down so I can think a second," he trailed off. An eerie silence came over the elevator as the doors opened on the Operations floor.

Here, the logistics of BioMed took shape. Security was housed here, both physical and network. The executives also had their offices up here. Everyone was hurriedly shuffled to the end of the hall, where we were greeted by yet another two guards. One, however, had a military looking rifle of some sort. He ordered us into a room with several tables. Two guards followed in with us, and a third shut and locked the door. There was a thick glass window that distorted our view out, but I could make out the silhouette of the guard standing outside.

There was a snack vending machine I made use of while we all nervously waited to find out what was going on. As I went to sit down next to Stan we heard the muffled voice of the guard outside shouting. I could make enough of him out to tell he was shouting and pointing down the hall. Then we heard four pops and a flash from his hand. I realized he wasn't just pointing, he had aimed his pistol. Immediately a blob of movement flew past our view and we could hear a scuffle, more pops, and more ominous screaming from the other side of the security door. Then-- nothing.

Silence. No movement, no sound. No one inside or outside of the room made a peep. The two guards in the room with us had their guns drawn towards the door, but said nothing. They only timidly looked at each other, as baffled and scared as the rest of us.

Time passed exceptionally slowly, after what felt like hours passed, but likely only a few minutes, Stan whispered to the closest guard.

"Should we be doing something?"

The guard considered the question as sweat beads rolled down his face.

"Uh, no. Just stay here a second."

The security officers looked at each other, and nodded, communicating without speaking. The closest guard approached the door and opened it slowly. He started to pull it, and suddenly the mangled remains of the guard outside who had apparently slumped against the door slid in. What was left of the head hit the tile floor and squished. He had been literally torn to pieces. His flesh ripped away from his face and appendages, some down to the bone, some to the muscle, his skull clearly visible, as well as his teeth from a hole in what was left in his cheek.

Audible gasps emitted from everyone, even the guards were startled by what they saw. But they quickly looked back and told us to be quiet. As they started into the hallway, stepping over the body of the third and looking carefully both ways, they motioned to us to follow them. No one budged.

One of the guards stepped back into the room.

"Listen, I know this is fucking crazy. But you have to come with us. The security station at the end of the hall is the absolute safest place in this building."

One of the employees in the back, Dan I think was his name, said succinctly "Then why the fuck did you put us in THIS god damn room?"

The guard looked down, then with a renewed sense of authority stated the obvious.

"Well, we have the guns. So... you can follow us to a safe place, or you can remain in this room and wait to be killed."

"A lot of good that gun did that other fellow," I silently mused to myself. It didn't seem to me that these were rioters. Regardless, I wasn't going to leave this room. It had a lock on it, and there was another door in the back that I hadn't explored yet.

As everyone else started to follow the guards, I stayed right where I was. Stan turned and beckoned me out. I just shook my head. He looked at me for another moment and slipped out the door with the rest of the group. I walked over to pushed the body out of the way, shut the door and locked it.

I indulged myself with another soda from the vending machine, secure in my location. It was insulated, had a thick door. I could kind of see out, but it was dark enough inside nothing could see in. I could even make out the fact that the sun had completely risen, and had lit up the hallways of the floor. At this point, curiosity had gotten the better of me and I walked over to the security door and slowly cracked it. I couldn't see much, although when I poked my head out, I saw where the hooligans had come in from. The door to the stairwell down the hall had been busted down, and the makeshift barricade tossed aside.

I looked down to inspect the horrible mess of torn uniform and flesh at my feet. It was barely even human now. It had nearly been torn entirely in half, all the organs strewn about. The nasty half-skull exposed face looked like it was smiling up at me. The back half of the head had been thoroughly bashed in, as well.

Then I noticed the firearm. It was a black pistol. It was strangely not blood soaked. In fact, the entire hand that gripped the gun and the arm up to the elbow remained somewhat unscathed. I instinctively grabbed the weapon and pulled it towards me, alas the guard had it in a death grip, no pun intended. I pulled some more to no avail. Not one to lose a tug-of-war with a corpse, I yanked it towards me and immediately I noticed I had lost hearing in my left ear, and had a horrible ringing in my right. I felt like someone knocked the wind out of me and I fell back into the room.

I then realized that an accident had occurred. Perhaps out of some post-mortem spite, pulling the gun towards me had seemingly caused it to discharge. I had a horrible cut in the hand I'd been grabbing it with. Then I noticed I had also shot myself. Blood quickly overtook clothes, contrasting heavily with my white shirt. The bullet struck me through my side, grazing my rib cage. I didn't feel anything yet, but even in my daze, I knew I would shortly.

It was in that moment I thought about the very loud sound I had just created. And while my hearing was still distorted, I could make out a lot of shouts and footsteps headed in my direction. I hurriedly crawled to the door to shut it, but the son of the bitch who shot me was now partially inside the room. I had inadvertently dragged him in with his gun.

The crowd of uninvited guests was nearing, but I couldn't kick the arm out before the first one flung into the room sending the door swinging into me, and sprawling me into the wall behind it.

I'm reasonably sure I was knocked out, at least momentarily. My vision blacked, and when I came back, I realized I was stuck between the door and the wall. I shook it off slightly, and peered around the door. The damn corpse was still blocking it. But I had a bigger problem. A person was standing five feet in front of me, looking at the vending machine. I could make out only his shape against the orange glow of the machine. I could hear some movement outside the room, as well, but disorganized and generally erratic.

Again, however, I saw the pistol. Now, it was right in front of me at my feet, right by the door that now hid me. I attempted to pull it a bit closer, this time with a little more care. The second I

did, the man at the vending machine turned towards me. We both stared at each other, and while I couldn't make out his eyes, I knew I was looking right into them.

I'm not sure who made the move first, whether I stood up or he lunged... but he barreled into the door with remarkable strength. It slammed shut, severing the dead guard's arm in place. I moved under the angry man and ended up on the other side of the room. He irrationally growled and hollered while fluttering around the room. I could now make him out more clearly. He was maybe in his 30's. He also had several injuries all over his body. While I didn't have time to ponder at that moment, the lacerations and chunks of his body missing were wounds no one could survive.

He lunged at me again, this time uprooting the table and sending it across the room. Now, his friends were pounding at the door as well. I again dodged his attack and the dead-ish man fell off to the side of the room. I made another grab for the gun. This time, however, luck was on my side, and it dislodged from the severed limb. The man struggled to get up, but then turned to me again.

I'd seen enough zombie movies to know what I had to do, and I knew without hesitation that was the situation I was placed in. I took aim at the man's head-- and promptly shot him in the arm.

*Oh shit.*

He ran at me again, this time partially catching my shirt and causing me to spin around with him, in a sort of awkward ballet move. I planted the gun firmly on his forehead and tried again. I pulled the trigger, striking my desired target. The man went limp, and I once again took notice of the terrible ringing in my ears.

I turned to the front door and saw it was being battered rather terribly, and wasn't likely to withstand much more of the beating. I needed an exit strategy. I wasn't sure where the door in the back would lead, but I didn't have a lot of options. I ran inside.

And so I found myself in the storage closet I mentioned earlier. I should have checked my caller ID this morning.

# NMRiH Contest Entry

by Setch Dreskar

Father Joshua Burke sat at the edge of the small wooden bench, which was nestled high up on one of the old factories many exterior catwalks. Out in all directions of the work yard below seemed to be an endless tide of trash and rubble, in fact the place was so old and decrepit that had the small rag tag group not received a radio call for help from inside this factory, they would never have bothered to come here at all. It was all a moot point regardless, when the group arrived they found a few badly shredded bodies, and the rotting abominations that had taken a feast of their flesh had long since gone.

Joshua let out a long sigh as he brought an unlit cigarette to his mouth; his mind filled with guilt that perhaps his prayers had delayed the group long enough for the beasts to do their gruesome work and left no one to save. Lance Corporal Andrew Tipp, a reservist Marine, had tried his best to convince him that the people inside were long dead before they had even set out, probably even dying just after sending the distress call. These reassurances did little to calm him or his thoughts, and as he brought up the lighter towards the tip of the cigarette the door leading out onto the catwalks opened and through which came the firm clap of a military issued boot against the metal of the catwalk. The man attached to said boot was First Lieutenant Arthur West, the de facto leader of this small band of survivors and officer of the Army's 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

"Hell Joshua if I was a flesh freak and you moved any slower for that sidearm, I could have had dinner and been off in search of dessert before you even got it in your hands." Arthur said as he came out onto the catwalks and looked out over the yard, noting only a couple of the walking flesh eaters out far beyond the fences and walls of the factory compound. "I also thought I said we were to always stay in a group, last thing we need is one of us gettin' bit and losing them."

"We still don't know bites, or any contact for that matter is what causes this thing to spread, for all we know we are all infected and once we die we become one of those things." Joshua said back as he lit up the cigarette and began to take a long drag off of it. After a few moments he then balanced the cigarette in his mouth while he shift his hand to take it back between his index and pinky finger, then using his pointer finger to brush at the sweat along his forehead.

"Does it matter honestly, listen I know you are down right now but we need to gather what we can and make our way back to the precinct, it won't remain a safe haven for

long if we don't keep bringing back supplies and survivors." Joshua shook his head some and slowly began to rise from his seated position, bringing the cigarette back to his mouth to take another drag from it.

"Is Sergeant Kennedy finished gathering up everything we can use?" Joshua asked as he turned back to the bench and slowly lifted the berretta back from its resting position and slide it into the leg holster he had been given from the police station now named 'Angel's Haven' much to Joshua's chagrin.

"Yes... /Officer/ Kennedy and Officer Newman are ready to go." Arthur said, and Joshua never really understood why he would keep making such a distinction between the military members of the group and those who were in law enforcement. Joshua wondered if deep down Arthur resented not being with one of the all military units setup by Colonel Sharp that would scour the city for things the haven needed to continue protecting its inhabitants. Arthur then flicked his right hand out and turned his wrist up, letting his left hand cradle the M4A3 in its combat sling while he checked the time on his watch. "It's Twenty-hundred hours, we will need to move quickly to get back to the Haven before they seal back up the sewer systems."

With that Arthur turned and in one fluid motion gripped the pistol grip of his M4A3 and rested his right finger out along the triggers well, making sure he didn't have it in the ring itself. It was a habit Joshua had yet to master, as much as the police officers and military vets had tried to force him to employ proper gun safety he always made mistakes. Again Joshua wondered if its why many of the group felt he was more a hassle then what he was worth, but Joshua also wanted to help out more than just sitting in the safety of Angel's Haven while other's put themselves at risk.

When the pair came in from the catwalks they were a couple stories up from the factory floor on one of the main walkways that ran the length of this building's interior. Far below them were nine people gathered around a pile of equipment, food and medical supplies they had gathered throughout the factory. Of the group two were policeman, two were Army soldiers, one reservist and two active duty Marines, while the remaining members of the group were an office worker and a gun store owner respectively. The group was slowly dividing up the rather meager pile of supplies into various piles each would be responsible for carrying back to the haven.

Considering the situation Joshua wasn't surprised that the room was choked with silence, almost no one wanted to admit they may have had the time to save someone here, and now taking what little they had as well. While Joshua and Arthur descended



the staircase the group began to collect their small piles, putting them into backpacks, duffle bags, and anything that could hold extra supplies. Joshua knew as well that he would have to take a few of the supplies, and once he too had reached the piles he began to open his satchel and shove as much stuff as he could fit before sealing it back up and looking up to the solemn faces around the group. Of the 11 present there were only three women; Sergeant Lucy Kennedy one of the local police officers, Corporal Caitlyn Pierce a United States Marine, and Samantha Cross who owned a gun shop a couple blocks from the police station. While some may have complained about their ability to keep up, when hell itself seems to walk the Earth, the social lines from before the disaster struck all but vanished. Samantha had even saved Joshua's life when he had been out looking for food a few weeks ago and alerted a small horde of the walking monsters to his presence.

"Are we all set to move?" Arthur's voice cut into Joshua's thoughts, but he gave a quick look back to Samantha and sighed some, he doubted he could ever repay her.

"Yes sir, we secured everything useful that wasn't bolted down." Replied Private Ian White, a rather green Army soldier, who had just finished resettling his combat pack across his back and began checking his weapon.

"Alright, you know how this works people, we will be moving back to the sewers and taking them all the way back to the Haven, keep your spacing and trigger discipline and we will be fine." Arthur spoke, as he began to shift towards the door, a few of the others in the group gave nods and checked to make sure their weapons were loaded and ready to go in case things went south. When the group shifted to move, Joshua took his place in the middle while those with the most military experience took up positions in front and back, leaving the civilians and police officers to move inside the protective bubble so to speak.

Caitlyn slowly opened one of the door's leading out to the yard, the door swinging open and lightly hitting the wall with a small thud. Caitlyn then brought her rifle up, the butt stock pressing to her shoulder as she slowly scanned out through the doorway before she brought her rifle down to a 45 degree angle. She then turned her head back and nodded her towards the doorway.

"It's clear, no movement." Caitlyn spoke before Andrew and Arthur stepped out through the doorway, quickly followed by the rest of the group. Those on the outside of the group quickly spaced out, turning and checking around each bit of debris as the group slowly made their way across the yard towards one of the sewage pump rooms that connected the factory to the city's sewer system. When they were almost halfway a

loud crack was heard, and the entire outer ring instantly dropped to a knee and scanned the area, leaving those in the middle to follow suit afterwards, trying to find the source of the noise. Andrew slowly brought his rifle up as he looked to his right, a strange groaning noise catching his, and those in the middle of the circle's attention.

As everyone began to tense up in preparation for the undead to come, a cry of panic erupted from the left side of the circle, instantly drawing everyone's attention. Caitlyn was pressing her rifle against the chest of one of the rotting creatures, the arms shifting grotesquely from their pinned position beneath the rifle trying to grab at her. Arthur quickly drew his rifle up, and as Caitlyn stepped back he pulled the trigger of his rifle, and with a sharp crack the zombie's chest rippled and gore splattered from its back onto one of the refuse piles. The sharp sound causes Joshua to tense up and rub at his ears as a dull ringing sound resounded in them, and if he had hoped to get some time to recover he would be mistaken as more and more loud cracks resounded.

The cries of hunger from the first undead beast had drawn the attention of others who were now bearing down on the group, much to Joshua's horror only a very small few that had begun pushing through the fences and gates were moving slowly. The vast majority of the creatures were not shambling slow moving horrors, but were all the more dreadful as they came barreling down at a full sprint, arms flailing as they called out in a hungered frenzy. As the gunfire began to escalate more and more Arthur shouted as loudly as he could to get everyone's attention.

"Too many, move now!" It took Joshua a couple seconds for the command to register before he was dragged up to his feet by Officer Karl Newman who was gripping the stock of his shotgun as tightly as he could with his free hand. Joshua was then pushed forward towards Arthur who was moving forward at a steady pace, rifle raised and squeezing off round after round into the horde running towards them. Though Arthur was missing a lot more since he was on the move Joshua was grateful that a few of the howling monsters was stumbling into the dirt and refuse scattered amongst the ground. Joshua's heart was racing as they got closer and closer to the pump room's door, as if each step closer was a step closer to salvation.

Joshua's hopes crashed about him though as Karl released coat from his grasp causing Joshua to stagger forward some before regaining his balance, he then turned his head to see what was going on while Karl was bringing the stock of the 12 gauge Remington to his shoulder. After a moment the thunderous roar of the 12 gauge kicked the butt back into Karl's shoulder as hot pellets went sailing into the right shoulder of one of the sprinters. Joshua watched as the skin rippled and small white bits surrounded by a shower of blood erupted from it's back and caused the creature to stumble

forward. As the beast's knees impacted the dirt it drew its arms up instinctively to try and stop its fall, but with its ruined shoulder the right arm snapped back and cracked out as the creature hit the ground hard.

To Joshua's horror the beast brought itself back to its feet with its left arm and once more joined the charge forward, its right limb dangling uselessly beside it as it ran. Thankfully though, after a brief pause another roar from 12 gauge collapsed the creature's chest, the beast's momentum carrying it forward as it once more impacted terra firma but this time remained there. Joshua turned his full attention back forward, and was thankful to be met with the sight of Arthur standing beside the door firing back into the crowd of zombies as Caitlyn and Andrew pushed through the door into the pump station. Joshua quickly ducked through the opening with Samantha and Karl close behind, as Arthur slapped yet another magazine into his M4A3 and letting off a few new rounds, waiting for everyone to enter before stepping back to enter himself. Arthur let his M4A3 fall in its combat sling as he grabbed the handle of the door and began to yank it closed, but one creature's arm thrust itself through the gap and wrapped its hand around Arthur's wrist and tugged it off the doorknob. Arthur let out a howl of surprise as the creature brought its head down rapidly and its death dug into and pulled some of the skin from his right hand before he could slam the door once more to get free.

The entire group turned and rushed to the door to help pull it closed, finding it rather easy as the zombies piled against the door which pushed the door against its frame, keeping it sealed. Arthur, however, pulled away from the group and looked at the back of his hand, blood freely flowing down the back of his glove and over the back of his wrist before dripping to the floor. Joshua turned to stare at Joshua in disbelief as he saw Arthur withdraw his pistol from its holster.

"Arthur hold on now... we don't kn-" Joshua began but was shortly cut off by Arthur's cry of anger

"Fuck that... I am not going out like that... I am not turning into a fucking abomination!" Arthur quickly brought the barrel of the pistol up to his chin as he slipped the safety off and held his left hand around the grip trying to finger the trigger quickly.

"Don't you dare you coward!" Cried Private First Class Harry Smith who was pushing through the other members of the group to try and get at Arthur. And though the Marine moved with a surprising amount of speed considering he was at the front of the group a loud crack signaled the end to the conversation as Arthur's head leaned back and blood splattered up against the underside of his officer's cover. Almost everyone in the group stood there in a brief moment of disbelief as Arthur's body slumped back

against the wall of the pump station's interior and slowly fell to the ground lifeless. Taylor Mason, who had worked at an insurance company before the disaster, began to babble incessantly, and to be fair the entire group was still shocked.

"Shit... holy shit did he just..." Taylor continued to say repeatedly, in varying tones and pitches. While Harry broke in, a look of anger coming across his face as he stared at the body.

"That damned coward, even if he had a little bite he could have fucking helped the rest of us get back... that arrogant piece of shit!" Karl brought his hand up to grab at Harry's shoulder to try and stop him but Harry shrugged him off and began to make his way towards the sewage maintenance tunnels. Joshua thought the moment of silence after Harry's outburst would never end, but Andrew interjected as he pointed to Arthur's body.

"Grab his gear, we can put it to use..." Andrew then paused some as he turned to follow Harry into the tunnels. "He won't need any of it anymore."

Though they knew it was what needed to be done, and with the undead horde pounding and pushing at the door, it took several minutes before they could even bare to start stripping the body of its gear. In a way it made Joshua proud, a feeling he regretted at the moment but he was proud of the dignity the group displayed in their moment of silence.

The city's sewer system wasn't what you might expect. If you had only known about them from movies, or video games you would have been surprised to find out just how cramped and confined the space was. The process of moving a group of people through such tight quarters was no easy feat, well perhaps easy but not comfortable by any means. Another thing of note Joshua was amazed how fast everyone was able to adapt to the smell and the pests roaming about, but things change after catastrophe. Progress through the tunnel was slow at best but it was a lot safer and comforting to travel via sewer rather than risk open fights with the mindless horde above ground.

It wasn't a fool proof plan mind you, the military in its zeal to try and save the city collapsed many of the tunnels, pipes and maintenance passageways that are used to move about now. It was by sheer happenstance that the military didn't destroy the city to try and protect other cities, of course there were a few explanations for this, but Joshua thought all of them were too horrible to bother dwelling on. Thinking, that itself was the real trouble with disasters in Joshua's mind, after all when something bad

strikes you suddenly have a lot of time to think and it always makes things worse. Fortunately something would soon occupy Joshua's mind in the form of several deep thuds echoing along the sewer causing Caitlyn the new team lead to signal everyone to stop.

"What is it Cait?" Asked Samantha who had moved a little closer in the hopes of receiving an answer, however it would be Andrew that would speak up.

"Gunfire I'd say... big guns too, at least 50's to be heard underground... only place with 50's nearby is Angels Haven." Andrew spoke, and then gave a more distraught look to Caitlyn who was fiddling with her radio equipment. Though they may have been down in a sewer pipeline, the radio system still worked for short wave communications.

"Angel's Haven, this is Corporal Pierce, factory rescue, Haven please respond, over." Caitlyn kept her hand grasped on her radio system, waiting for a response, and as the seconds ticked by and the booming thuds continued, the entire groups disposition became more soured. After a few moments more Caitlyn hastily called in yet again. "Angel's Haven this is Corporal Pierce, respond, over!"

After what seemed to be a moment, everyone's radio crackled and came to life with an emergency broadcast.

"To all away teams, this is Colonel Timothy Sharp, Angel's Haven has been breached and the perimeter is down, we are evacuating via convoy to the stadium, I repeat rendezvous at the stadium, Angel's Haven is lost." With no other words the radios went silent and the deep thuds one could only assume were the big guns Andrew described began to get further and further away.

"Shit we've had it now..." Taylor spoke up "the stadium is 10 blocks away, and the sewer tunnels leading there collapsed when the Marines blew up Halliford Street." Caitlyn looked back towards Taylor and gave a nod.

"Indeed... so we take to the surface." Caitlyn then paused a moment as she surveyed the faces around her. "We have no choice, it's that or head back to the Haven and die..." She then let out a sigh as she turned and began to push on through the sludge lining the sewer tunnels. Deep down Joshua knew she was right, but already losing one member of the group, he would have preferred they stayed underground like rats.

With a small grunt Andrew pushed up and slowly slid the heavy manhole cover off to the side, letting his hand which firmly clasped his Ka-Bar out of the manhole first before

he stuck his head up to survey the area. He then gave a slight nod to those beneath him as he brought himself up and out of the sewer system, stretching out and taking a long breath of fresh air. Soon others began to poke out of the manhole, stretching out and shuffling about as they looked around the area cautiously.

Halliford Street was not a place one visited intentionally after the Marine Strike Force left several craters, wrecked cars, and dead in their wake. While it was the fastest route to the stadium, the convoy leaving Angel's Haven would most certainly choose to go down the back roads rather than try navigating the mess. As Joshua looked down the road in either direction he was met with a visage of pure destruction, nothing but a sea of twisted wrecks, collapsed buildings and rotting corpses filled the road and its sidewalks. Most troubling to Joshua is he could see the charred remains of a marine helicopter, impaled partially into the side of one of the financial skyscrapers, how it was brought down was a mystery but the point is that it was.

The group began to muster its resolve and pushed north, their movements heralded by flocks of crows that scattered into the noon sky, chased away from their feast of flesh. Joshua once more found himself grateful, whatever hellish virus or curse this was, he was glad it had no affect on animals, if it did Joshua doubted that anyone would have survived. The trip thus far was rather uneventful, though they did encounter zombies frequently they seemed content to feast on the rotting corpses still scattered everywhere then to bother working for a meal they may not get. It was rather disturbing as the group weaved in and out of burned out husks, toppled construction and collapsed walls, in fact it was almost surreal if anything could be called such in the midst of a zombie apocalypse.

This moment of solitude didn't last long as a shriek went up from one of the fallen buildings, followed by the groan of hunger and the howls of the desperately starving. It took only a few moments for several sprinters, along with a few shamblers to begin making their way through the debris fields towards the group once more. Caitlyn was quick to respond as she called out for the group to move, while letting a couple rounds fly from her M16 into the rotting undead abominations. It would have seemed like déjà vu had a new cry not erupted, one of panic.

Though the safety bubble was designed to protect those who had less military experience, it seemed a couple sprinters had made it through and had cut off and herded Taylor away from the group. His cries for help were barely audible over the frenzied way he let loose with the Glock 18 he was given to defend himself. Karl turned to respond as did Lucy, but before the two could even try to help a wayward swipe from one of the sprinter's caught Taylor's clothing and sent him tumbling to the ground,

causing him to impact against one of the more intact cars scattered about the street. It took only a few seconds before the sprinters began tearing at him with all their might and devouring chunks of his flesh, the last thing anyone could do was end it for Taylor, fortunately Lucy did with a couple shots fired into Taylor's head and neck.

While the others were occupied, another sprinter darted from the rubble straight towards Joshua, who only caught sight of him when it stumbled on its course. Joshua fumbled slightly to bring the M92 service pistol he had been given up and quickly took up the best stance he could before he began to pull back on the trigger. Much to Joshua's horror though the gun did nothing, the trigger didn't budge, the hammer didn't come back and fall forward, the gun made no sound at all. Joshua was frozen in dread but soon his good senses returned and he made a direct 180 and made a beeline for a nearby truck, pistol still in hand as he ran with all his might to reach it.

As he flung the door open he could hear the footfalls of the sprinter rushing at him, and as he slammed the door shut he swore he could feel its breath against his skin, though a bit exaggerated no sooner had he shut the door then the upper half of the sprinter was coming through the open window clawing at him. Joshua instantly laid back against the seats, his boots kicking and flailing at the monster's hands that tried to get a solid hold to pull its prey closer, all the while the handgun he had once gripped was resting on the floor. Joshua did his best to blindly feel for it, though it didn't fire before it was his best hope, kicking and screaming was only going to make him die tired.

The beast began to flail more savagely as it got its upper body into the truck more and more, even with Joshua kicking it in the face and in general doing his best to keep the creature out. Soon the monster gripped Joshua's right leg and was about to tug on it but Joshua was able to use his left boot crashing into the creature's face to free him of its grasp, however this did not last long as the decaying hands grabbed and clenched at him once more. Joshua began to increase the speed of his frantic search, and finally just decided to say hell with it and look for the damned thing with his eyes, spotting it almost instantly far higher than he ever thought to search. Joshua's hands quickly grabbed the pistol's grip and brought it back up to bare, he frantically ran through his mind everything he could have done wrong before it dawned on him, push the damned safety.

As Joshua continued to frantically kick and push at the creature he turned the pistol to the side and quickly flipped the safety before he turned the barrel to point it directly at the beast's slaving mouth. He had no time to line up a shot or worry if he was about to blow his foot off, he just took a deep breath, said the quickest prayer he could and pulled the trigger. Instantly the berretta erupted with fire, the slide kicking back towards

him as the hammer impacted the percussion cap of the round, the spent shell sent flying from the weapon as the hot lead round slicing into the creature's brow, collapsing its right eye socket before the head gave a soft push back and blood showered from the rear. Joshua's ears rang as the creature's lifeless body slumped back and fell free of the truck, and without a moment's hesitation Joshua grabbed at his feet and began looking for any signs he had been bitten or scratched relieved to find signs of neither.

The truck door soon opened and Karl Newman reached in to grab Joshua by the coat, tugging him out of the car as he looked about.

"We can't stay... we are leaving now!" Karl said as Joshua stumbled to his feet and followed quickly after him as Karl sprinted off towards the group.

"Y-you don't say... it was such a nice neighborhood too." Joshua retorted, doing his best to mask the sheer overwhelming fear he had just experienced not even 10 seconds before.

Everyone was breathing heavily as they rounded the last block to the stadium, the massive empty parking lot a welcome change of scenery and pace from the constant valleys of bombshells, overturned cars and the marathon they had to keep running from the hungry undead. The group continued turning and dropping a couple of the closer undead walkers, until they were nearly half way across the parking lot, finally seeing the last of the putrid creatures fall. Letting everyone slow down to catch their collective breaths, surprised they had managed to outpace and outgun enough of the beasts to make it to the safety of the stadium, but there was something none of them could shake, the stadium was far too quiet for it to be the new gathering point.

"Where the hell is everyone..." Caitlyn was the first to mutter as she looked about, not seeing or hearing any signs of a convoy of vehicles, heavily armed and loaded with people nearby. "Does anyone remember hearing the big guns while we were fighting our way here?"

The entirety of the group was now turning, each looking in different directions, listening and waiting to hear or see any sign or trace of the people from Angel's Haven, hoping their worst fears would not be true. There were simply none to be had, even when the group began to make its way into the stadium itself, which was unusually calm and peaceful save for the few dead bodies lying here and there. Something most certainly didn't feel right, and calling repeatedly over and over again on all of their radios only made things far worse. Eventually they got the idea to move to the top of



the stadium and look out to see if they could spot anything, what they eventually found on the eastern side of the stadium did little to help.

Far off to the east, perhaps a couple blocks or more there was an unusually large horde of the undead gathering. It was not a sight that could be easily spotted but it was made all the more noticeable by the flocks of crows circling and moving into the area, when Caitlyn brought up a pair of her binoculars to try and get a better view, she nearly recoiled in horror as she saw a SWAT van drenched in a fresh coat of blood, with the Angel's halo painted across the hood. It's as if the nightmare could not possibly get any worse, their friends, those they had sworn to protect and aid, those they had spoken too just mere hours ago, were gone. It was not conclusive proof but it was all the proof the disheartened group needed that they were once again, all alone.

It was something they all knew may someday come true, even Joshua had to admit that his mind had drifted to this possibility more than once. He even wondered would it not be better, being alone once more, leaving only himself to wallow in his misery. Well Joshua had his answer now and he wanted nothing more than to be engulfed, and to never be alone again.

"It can't be... not all of them, surely some of them-" Harry began but was quickly quieted by Andrew who was rubbing at his eyes with the palms of his hands.

"You can see how many of those freaks are over there from here, that's too many for anything to survive." Andrew then leaned his head back as he leaned back into one of the seats in the nosebleed section of the stadium's eastern wing.

"We should go look for survi-" Joshua began to protest but Andrew once more cut in.

"Don't you get it, there is no way anyone survived, we could barely hold off a dozen of the beasts, that has to be nearer 200 plus, no one is left to save." Andrew then leaned forward and lightly wringed his hands together. "That's why I say we pack up a few of the utility vehicles here, and head out to the country... setup shelter there."

"I agree, we are losing more and more people by staying here... all things considered we are lucky, we lost only two of us, but how many have died because we arrogantly said we will not budge from this city." Caitlyn spoke up, a sentiment Samantha and Karl seemed to share or so their nodding heads and more subdued expressions seemed to let on. Joshua just couldn't see the heart in it, they had to try, someone could be out there, and they would need help.

“No we-“ Joshua could barely mutter before Andrew was on his feet and glaring directly at him.

“Either you get in one of the trucks, or I will put you in one of the trucks.” Andrew said coldly before he looked over the rest of the group. “We have lost too many... we won’t lose any more by making stupid choices ever again.”

Joshua looked into Andrew’s eyes, but what he was surprised to see was not some sort of anger, but a deep sorrow. With a begrudging nod Joshua turned away from Andrew, closing his eyes and stifling a few tears that had built up, he made his way down the concrete stairs of the stadium.

# The Transmutation of Anastasia

- Winning Entry -

by Darrin 'Bluehawk' Boland

When she reflected on those events in the small mining town whose name she never learned and whose location she could not begin to approximate, she had to admit again as she always did that it was the single most defining moment of her life and marked the threshold between her true adolescence and her adulthood. Every day prior to it seemed like some ill-remembered fiction or tall tale, that her place in those scattered anecdotes was just some sketch of a heroine with whom she never fully related as a child, yet all sensations aside she was nevertheless that same girl. Anastasia recalled the day reluctantly for anyone who asked the tale and with each recount she did not embellish, rather the opposite. Each rendition was further and further contracted and hastened, not by a failing memory but by a desire to close the chapter indefinitely and let it slip into the abyss of childhood. I preserve it now in as much detail as possible, both to satiate the morbidly curious and to ease her of the bard's burden.

Somewhere in the south of Ukraine on a swaying highway coursing absently towards the Black Sea, rolled a rust-and-salt-eaten old white sedan with a crumpled left tail-light and a severed radio antenna. With its lights off, it ground its way across the dusty pavement with a siren-call otherwise placeless in the swallowing black valleys of a desolate nation. Only by the low moon and stars were the hills lit and shaded, and not a single hint of civilization glowed on the horizons of that wide, sprawling blue scape that made one feel like a troll in a hall of giants. Alexei, known then almost exclusively to his passengers as Losha, was nervously eyeing the glowing fuel gauge under his steering wheel and watching the arrow eclipse the red mark at a glacial pace. At once and startlingly, the other three called out as they passed a road sign. No one had caught the name of the town, but knew that in less than a kilometer there would be a turn to make.

"It said there's a gas station in town," remarked one passenger from the back seat, the ever hopeful Nadia.

"In town', and not just on the road or, heaven forbid, on the highway," added Stepan, beside her.

Our Asya sat in the front beside Losha gazing out the window at the passing silhouettes of trees and through them to the shapeless fields of blue and black, fidgeting with the frays of her black dress-pants which had been torn below the knees. "It's our only option at this point, right?"

"I'd rather we raid a station on the highway," Stepan said.

"No," countered Losha, agreeing with Asya. "We don't have enough fuel to go past it. Either we use this station or we walk."

The corner came up on their right, marked by a lonely round yield sign normally visible immediately in the beams of an oncoming vehicle, but now lurking in the concealment of a tree's blanketing canopy. They pulled over on the side of the highway and cut out the engine. "We'll keep the car here and run back if anything happens. Alright?"

“Why not just drive up to the station?” asked Stepan. “I don’t want to be outside if the place is crawling with crazies.”

“Because the engine will immediately arouse them if there are any around. Trust me, I’ve done this once before and it’s a lot safer to go on foot.”

“Let’s listen to Losha,” said Nadia. “Stepan, he was on the road already before we joined him. Remember?”

Being forced to argue a shaky position for the sake of denying Losha the satisfaction and resenting Nadia’s encouragement, Stepan was eager to end the discussion altogether. “Fine, we’ll walk. Let’s go.” Being the first out of the car, Stepan straightened his belt and felt the leather holster of his knife to reassure himself it was seated properly and drew his Makarov from his jacket pocket. Nadia and Asya joined him in the center of the road and readied their clubs: a metal pipe and a police nightstick. Even in the dim autumn night and stained with the blood of a previous encounter, Nadia’s shirt bloomed a radiant orange. Pausing for a moment, Losha decided to leave the key in the ignition and finally heaved himself out of his seat and retrieved his weapon. His creamy beige, knitted sweater appeared gray under the moon and was cut in two by a bandolier of shells. Straightening his backpack with one hand and grasping a TOZ over-under shotgun in the other, he posed commandingly for the turned backs of his perceived subordinates. He drew a deep breath and pushed himself around the car, finding his balance, and took the lead.

Rounding the corner, the four young carpoolers stood atop a small slope that led down a long stretch of houses and small storefronts that broke off thrice into side-streets before culminating in an intersection. It was to the left of the intersection that they spotted the awning of the gas station, and to the right of it emerged a small hillock supporting the town church. On all sides of the town core appeared a few lone homes, barns, and closed fields before the valley soared out on both sides and threw up jagged rocky crowns into the twinkling gulfs. Down out of the rustling brown trees and into the open leaf-strewn fields hiked the group, listening intently for any signs of life but hearing only their own breath and the playing of the winds. Snapping twigs and scuffing aside crystals of broken glass, the four cautiously drifted past smashed windows and knocked-in doors; abandoned and disassembled cars; newspapers and discarded cigarette butts; and various scattered shards and splinters of bone and cloth.

At the gas pumps they stopped and looked around, trying as they might to probe into the yawning orifices of the ravaged homes. Nothing stirred and nowhere was there light. Asya took Losha’s shotgun from his hand and freed him to unscrew the cap off his jerry can. Stepan forced his way as carefully as he could over the heap of debris in the station office’s doorway and fumbled his way towards the cashier’s counter, probing every wall and shelf for retail goods. The building had been completely sacked, both the storefront and the manager’s backroom, with even the shelving and office cabinets partially disassembled and taken off for unknown purposes.

“Any luck?” called back Asya to Losha from the road.

“They’re dry,” he said in frustration. “Completely dry.”

“So what do—”

A piercing scream shot through the cool air, shocking them both as they snapped their heads immediately toward the large warehouse one lot removed from the gas station. Out of the station’s doorway crawled Stepan responding as immediately as

possible over the obstacles. It was a feminine cry, of both primal terror and conscious desperation. After a moment of brief paralysis it was answered by a mangy choir of low, whining agony. From all directions hissed and moaned uncountable sleepers that now creaked and snapped their way out of their idle residences and wandered towards that exhausted depot. Before even righting himself, Stepan set off around the corner at a hunch and drew his pistol. Hopping over a barbed-wire fence, Nadia nearly collided with him. Behind her, rolling headfirst over the same fence and scuttling through the grass on all fours came a creature of alarming speed and ferocity, yelping and growling with a bloodlust supremely human in its maliciousness. Before Stepan could take aim, the predator leapt upon Nadia's ankles and clamped its fangs down into her milky skin like a sprung trap, gorging itself on her thick and satiating blood. An explosion shattered their eardrums and in its flash the torn and sinking skin of the creature's face could at last be seen. A scruff of hair flew off its scalp and its jaw went slack.

She hung on to his hips and pulled herself up onto both feet but they fell out from under her. Whimpering and grunting as much in realization as in pain, Nadia cried: "I can't do it!"

"I got you," Stepan said before actually taking her up, but turning her about and wrapping an arm around her to bear her weight and walk her back to the pumps. Rolling her head around and babbling, she could barely grab up to a fistful of his leather jacket and slipped inch by inch out of his grasp. Losha rushed to help from the other side just as the shotgun let out a marvelous thunderclap and threw open a sprinting horror's chest.

"There's light in that church!" Asya called out as she took aim back up the slope from whence they had hiked and let the second shell of buckshot scatter itself across the crowd of shambling, broke-legged heaps that let out a collective whimper in reply. She broke the weapon in two, pulled out the smoking cartridges and looked back at Losha and his bandolier with eyes so wide they caught the starlight.

Up the hillock they fled and against the front doors of the white and gold chapel they pulled and clawed, but it would not yield its asylum to them. Behind them the horde began to wander into the intersection and regain knowledge of their pray. Kicking and pounding, the survivors threw themselves at the gates, howling with desperation.

"Patience, my children," called a weak old voice. "Patience now. Your misery is almost at an end. I'm not a very good shot so stand still now."

"Don't shoot!" screamed Losha and Asya.

"We're still alive, you dumb old fuck!" strained Stepan as he pushed Nadia's head off of his own with a nudge of his cheek.

"They speak!? You speak! You're alive! Lord have mercy!"

In a moment that seemed to stretch on for an hour, the gate rumbled with the screeches and thuds of heavy wood against wood and stone, but at last the doors opened and a frail cloaked figure beckoned them in. There in the golden light of a dozen candles, the two men set Nadia down against the doorway of the vestibule and helped the tenant rebuild his barricade. Two benches, a throne and a podium now stood in the way of the horde that slapped, pawed and smeared themselves listlessly against the doors with none of the force or passion of the survivors.

Asya showed Nadia to the priest who gasped at her wound and painfully eased himself to a squat to inspect it better. His golden pectoral cross gleamed in the candle light as it swung freely from his hunched neck and prompted Asya to look past him at the

various gold foil halos adorning the many images of the iconostasis, at the foot of which now sat Stepan and Losha on the steps, catching their breath. She had not been in a church for many years and she had forgotten how the lustre had moved her years ago. The wave of nostalgia also brought on the realization that neither her head nor Nadia's were covered. Although the nave was bare of furniture and the naked floor was littered with soot, gravel, and empty cans, its walls and windows were pristine. The symmetry of the chamber was disrupted by the addition of a bell tower on the right-side, whose doorway halted a panel of saints. Above the beautiful gates to the sanctuary hung a large three-barred cross, whose slanted bar pointed down to Stepan's head hung slack on his shoulders. Losha sat on his right and leaned back on a hand to stare up at the ceiling without any particular focus, shotgun resting across his lap.

Nadia had fainted from her wound and was losing a great deal of blood. From Losha's backpack discarded by the front door next to the priest's rifle, Asya had taken a scrap of cloth and made a dressing and tourniquet, but the priest stood up and shook his head. "She is very weak now. She is infected too, I think."

"You can't do anything for her?"

"I can make her comfortable and perform the sacraments, but I cannot save her life."

Hoisting her up by her shins and shoulders, Asya and the priest carried Nadia gently into the sanctuary and closed the doors behind themselves. Through the barrier, the men listened to the gruff, monotone voice drone on in well-practiced succession with nary a pause for many uncountable minutes. Thrice Stepan started to turn to speak but could not find a way to phrase his grief, guilt, frustration, anticipation, or impatience, and so the silence in the nave stretched on and his anxiety deepened further still.

Asya's voice could then be heard, and the priest and her had a conversation which she has never once recalled but can easily be inferred, and finally there echoed two terrible bangs before their silent emergence of from within the gateway.

Nadia was dead and wrapped, and Losha and Stepan were to carry the body up the bell tower and hurl her unceremoniously into a pit. Grimly the two grabbed the tube of cloth and staggered through the especially dark, cramped and smoky passage of crooked and sunken stairs, spiraling their way around the pull cords of the three gaping bells above. "So what do we do now, huh?" Stepan grunted between steps. "Any ideas?"

"Your side's slacking."

"We're at the top already, answer the question."

"I don't know. There's the pit. Ready?"

"Wait," protested Stepan. He turned himself around and took the body painfully under one arm and used his free hand to unwrap the cloth. When he unmasked her head and torso, he saw her bone-white face and collar and nearly dropped her headfirst onto the floorboards. In her forehead and through her heart the priest had nailed two metal stakes.

"Ready?" asked Losha again.

Over the railing they hurled the corpse and into the wide, shadowed pit it tumbled end over end. It landed flat on its back with a soft thud and conformed to some unseen obstruction within, which Asya would know was a heap of previous victims, all mangled and staked. After the impact, a silhouette stirred from below and pulled itself out of the hole to slither away with a mouth full of flesh glistening in the moonlight.

Returning down the stairs, the two men convened with their companion and the priest by a candle holder on a righted table. "Anastasia Pilipivna has told me about your fuel problem. I have the petrol, all of it. I've been using it for cremations. I will gladly give you two cans if..." He hesitated to ask.

"Oh wow," said Stepan in disbelief.

"If you can first reach the small grocery store in the middle of town. It's been a week since that mineshaft erupted with the sick and deranged, and I've run out of most solid food. If you can bring me water as well, then I will gladly help you get out of here."

"What's this about a mineshaft?" Losha asked.

"There's where the sickness took hold. Oh, I'm sure it's not from the mine itself. Maybe someone passing through town brought it from the city and the workers took it down with them, but that's where it grew and spread. Down in those tunnels was where the men started to collapse and wake up delirious and thrashing. Some of the people died down there, from the heat they say, or the stress. But they weren't dead for long." The priest crossed himself. "That was how we were punished."

"We'll get you the food, if there's any left," replied Asya on their behalf. "I saw the store on the way in."

With nothing to discuss or bargain, they cautiously slipped back out the front doors under the priest's careful instructions and descended the hill to the bloodied intersection. Behind them, a pyre plumed up from the pit, as the priest poured petrol down from the bell tower and dropped a torch. The light and smell drew some of the shufflers, crawlers and draggers, and the three survivors quietly proceeded down the street without incident. They formed a triangle and slowly rotated around, trying to cover the four cardinal directions with only three sets of eyes, and worse still only two firearms. Asya, wielding a baton in one hand and a pipe in the other, felt particularly vulnerable when she assumed the forward position.

The store was, like every other structure, a shamble of tipped over shelves, broken windows, and sticky floors strewn with assorted litter and debris. It was impossible to move without kicking something across the linoleum tiles or crushing something underfoot and in the dead of the night in that eradicated village, they sounded to each other as raucous and destructive as the crowd that surely raided the store in the week before. Most was taken, and of what little remained, few was still preserved. Boxes and bags of rotten meat and vegetables were strewn everywhere and the store had the odour of a crypt thrown open, but Losha managed to find some canned meats in a far corner, and Asya collected a few scattered bottles of water.

Stepan, who was watching the door with the reloaded shotgun and accompanying bandolier, let his eyes wander aside to a curiously untouched series of bottles on a shelf wedged behind a knocked-over partition. Rustling the glass and plastic with each step, he clumsily crept toward what he discovered to be two bottles of scotch, a bottle of gin, and a bottle of vodka. While examining their labels and trying his best to gauge their age and worth, he was distracted briefly by the creaking of metal. Embarrassed to be caught off guard he jumped and turned to present the bottle as a valid excuse.

Losha and Asya on opposite ends of the store were interrupted in their scavenging by a horrendous, octave-straddling, scream. Losha arrived first with Stepan's Makarov at the ready, staring for a moment at two dogs tearing a small pony apart. Straining his eyes and taking aim, he concentrated just long enough to see one of the hounds turn back with

a flat, simian face before blinding himself with a muzzle flash and tearing the beast's nose apart. The second ghoul was in full stride by the time Losha's irises expanded and aligned again, and his sweater was torn into by the thing. Falling back onto a countertop covered in mice droppings and lottery tickets, the man dropped the pistol and tried to reach down for the neck to strangle the attacker, but with his ring fingers on the Adam's apple and not his thumbs, it was especially awkward.

It was then that a third creature, more graceful and civilized, appeared at the mouth of the aisle and dropped a steal pipe into the back of the hound's head with both hands. Losha yelped in surprise and Asya, startled and shocked by her own actions, gasped in reply. The ghoulish assailant went slack and rolled off to one side, sipping at the air shallowly with fingers and toes spasming. With an arm stretched out in revulsion, she probed toward the mass of Stepan and pulled the bloody bandolier and gun off of him. Losha had rolled up his sleeves to inspect the marks he had been given. He was covered in the blood of three men in addition to his own. He wiped his face with his collar and forced himself onto his feet, looking at the gashes with doom and despair.

They spared no time in returning to the church, with the backpack full of food and water, the bandolier, Stepan's spare pistol magazines, and the shotgun. They had neither the time nor the inclination to recover his knife from his belt. The moon had drifted in the sky and the shadows swung across the weedy, cracked asphalt. Jogging down the road with Asya beside him, Losha felt absolutely fatigued and let his head sway from shoulder to shoulder, and his eyes roll to every corner, fighting against his eye-lids to stay open. His wounds were minor, but they had come after so many hours of tension and horror, so many miles driven without break, and so many burned calories without replacement, that he wanted nothing more than to throw himself across the steps of the sanctuary and sleep for a day.

Once more they banged on the front doors, and again the priest strained himself to clear the way and admit them. Into the warming golden light of a dozen flickering candles they trudged, and past the arch of the narthex they eased themselves to the floor. Losha dumped out the cans and bottles, clanking and crumpling across the floor, and fished out a dressing for his arm. Asya sat in front of him and labouriously replaced the magazine in the pistol, stalling as long as she practically could, as if to appear busy. He picked up on it and shot her a glance through his eyebrows. "It's pretty minor, I think," he probed.

"It won't kill ya," she said, smiling with the corner of her mouth. It was true, but not the complete truth.

He waited, and stared at her, trying to force her to make eye contact but he couldn't. She pretended to admire the icons on the wall above them. Their calm, poised faces, each identical to the next, stared out at her with withdrawn contentment. Their halos flickered with the candle light like the stars beyond the stained glass. He gave up. He drew a single, full breath that swelled his chest and pained a rib, and said: "don't bother fetching the priest."

She blinked rapidly and her wrist began to tremble before she straightened it.

"I wanted to you know..." he began. "that... I—"

"Don't," she said, wavering. She locked eyes with him and they shined like glass, even with her face in shadow.



It was selfish of her to deny him that admission, but he knew that she knew it, so he clenched the anxiety down until the desire was drowned, and there was only the painful silence. She stood up, put one foot forward, and waited still for him to speak again. He did not and closed his eyes.

She looked off towards the vestibule to hear the priest behind the wall, lurking in the narthex and whispering a prayer. She focused on that spot on the wall where her mind drew the priest's unseen form, and fired. A candle was blown out and the saints grew dimmer. A brass tubular bell resounded against the floor, and the priest fell silent.

With one eye closed and the other cast down, she gathered up the backpack, the bandolier, the shotgun and the two jerry cans she was promised without looking at Losha again. When at last she marched up to the archway and the narthex, the priest stepped out in front of her. She waited for him to reproach her or slap her, but instead he slowly raised an arthritic hand and made the sign of the cross over her. When he presented his pectoral cross, she teared silently and kissed it, before clearing the barricade on her own and disappearing through the doors onto the barren hillock.

Through the town she ran with all her salvaged gear, a can of gasoline in each arm, stopping for no one and allowing nothing to distract her. Up the hill she slowed but never tripped up or paused, and behind her she drew a crowd, but only a handful could keep pace with her. At the corner she spotted the car and slowed to a walk.

In response to a pair of quick and erratic footfalls behind her, she swung around with one gas can at eye level and collided with the head of some spindly stalker, sending him to the pavement. Up came the pistol. By the flicker of a film projector she crippled, collapsed and killed the determined figures, seeing their grotesque disfigurements for only fractions of a second. Alone again, she nervously opened the first can and refilled the gas tank, spilling drops all down the side and onto the ground, but topping it off with some to spare. Throwing the two cans, heavy and light, into the back with the satchel, she darted to the driver's side door, started the engine and slammed the accelerator, spitting bloody dust and petrol mist into the night air.

Anastasia, a new woman, did not know if she would drive straight to the Black Sea or up into the Carpathians or somewhere further, but she had plenty of time to think it through, and over the knotted peaks the sky was yielding a new bright light.

# NMRiH

by Emanuel Moshouris

## One

“Jay-”

Concussions are a fantastically interesting thing.

“Jeh-”

You don't know you're concussed when you've had a concussion. You're not really around for the concussion. You slip in and out of consciousness, but you don't remember it. Ten minutes, ten days, ten years later, you won't recall anything. You don't remember the gray haze induced by your pre-frontal cortex smashing into your neurocranium. All you remember, is that you were feeling slightly uncomfortable.

“Keh.”

My favorite fact about a concussion, is that although you don't remember it, you are definitely there. Most cases of concussions involve open dialogue with the concussed. They will hold conversations with their habilitators as if nothing was wrong, only to forget what they were talking about a few seconds later, and ask what exactly was for dinner, for the sixtieth time.

“Jake.”

I don't know who Jake is, but whoever is looking for him is getting pretty fucking annoying.

This wasn't my first concussion. I'd been involved in a Rugby accident when I was in college. When I say accident, I mean I was hit in the face with a knee. It wasn't really an accident, as much as it was an intentional mishap. He intended to rearrange my facial structure, and I intended to keep it the way it was. I liked where my nose was. I even enjoyed the fervency in which it pointed straight. Me and my nose had a great agreement - I took care of it, and it tried its best to not look absurd.

“Jake!”

After that game, our agreement had been breached.

“Jake! I'm serious! We have to go!”

The difference between that game of Rugby, and what was happening right now, was that I had signed up for that intramural Rugby league. I even indulged a little and upgraded my health insurance policy that semester.

“Jesus Christ, We have to get the fuck out of here.”

Another, small difference, was that the ambulance back then was much more comfortable than this.

“Jake! Are you there? You’re going to get us killed!”

“Who the fuck is Jake?”

I really hate the name Jake.

“Jake, can you run? You’re only bleeding from the head. Your legs should be fine.”

They didn’t feel fine.

“I need you to try getting on your feet, and see if you can move on your own. The others are ahead of us, setting up the next floor.” The muffled voice was hard to understand over the shrieking of whatever was behind us.

I opened my eyes. His voice was muffled because I was listening to Tom’s voice through the back of his sternum, as he fireman carried me through a dark, cement laden corridor. The top half of the skyline of New York littered my red tinted view of the shaky world, courtesy of Tom’s frantic running.

“I can try”

Talking with a mouth full of blood is never easy.

Tom is at best, 5’6 and quite averagely built. This is alarming. With my 6’3 build, he’s either trying to work out his glutes, or something has shot enough adrenaline into his blood stream to allow him to carry 200 pounds as if it were a child’s backpack.

Tom turned his forward sprint into a backwards jog as he fired shots from his forty calibre glock at something that was now in front of us. I immediately took to my feet, and funnily, remembered how sprinting worked. It’s amazing what a little motivation can do at the right time.

He spun back around, and kept his left hand on my shoulder, as if to remind me that running was quite important, and to not do so would result in less than ideal circumstances.

Suddenly, I remembered where I was.

Why I was on the fiftieth story of the unbuilt world trade center tower, I was not sure. That hadn’t come back to me yet. My name hadn’t either. I began wiping blood from my

brow as I ran, and my vision began its slow return to a normal, yellow fluorescent lit hue. All was becoming well in the world.

“Jake! Quicker! Christine and the rest are on 54. They’re finishing a barricade.” Tom was having a hard time shouting over the shrieking and lack of breath.

“Who the fuck is Jake!” I knew he meant me, but it seemed like the right time to convey to him I didn’t remember my name at the moment. Hopefully his comprehension of my level of incomprehension would lead him to not rely on me to make any difficult decisions or maneuvers later on. I wasn’t really in the mood for either.

“Shut the fuck up, Jake, and run!”

“54 is not one more than 50, either!” I complained.

My legs began to burn.

Each breath I sucked in became more and more insufficient. My body was already yearning for rest in lieu of my new-found head injury. Pumping away with my legs was causing a slight distress to accent my already beaming headache.

As we turned a corner, passing a set of unfinished concrete walls, a makeshift elevator came into view. Its gray metal mesh doors seemed more welcoming than the Garden of Eden at that moment, and could have been made of fire yet I wouldn’t have minded.

“What is that noise!” I managed to yell over the sound of exacerbated footsteps and shrills.

“RUN!”

I could tell Tom wasn’t in the mood for lectures.

As the steel beams holding the floor above us whizzed by, it reminded me of the little flip books I used to make as a child. The slow frame rate of New York’s skyline flashing in my peripheral vision seemed beautiful somehow. Why? Why was this so fascinating to me at a time like this?

Oh.

It’s dark. There were no lights in New York. There was only the light shade of white moonlight cascading across the water, and reflecting onto the still windows of the hundreds of buildings making up the metropolis that millions of people once inhabited. It was so dark. I’d never seen New York like this. Even after The Break, I’d been resigned to the streets, and fifth story lofts, huddling for safety.

My god, was New York beautiful. I realize now it wasn't New York I hated, just New Yorkers.

Why was I observing this, still? Perhaps it was my concussion. Maybe it was the impending sense of death sending my brain into a more romantic mood. Just before you die, your life is supposed to flash in front of your eyes.

Maybe this is what you see when there's nothing to flash.

## Two

The elevator doors shut, and the black figure descended on the door at an alarming rate. At this moment in time, my best friend in the world was made of aluminum. I didn't mind that he wasn't much to talk to at parties.

Tom collapsed backwards onto the rear part of the fenced elevator. We began to slowly rise just as the black form neared twenty feet to us.

Closer, closer, it came.

It is so dark, here.

I don't like it.

The elevator was at the beginning of the next floor. Just as our eyesight began looking at the concrete and components making up the floor we were about to embark on, a loud bang reminded us we weren't exactly in the right place to be comfortable yet. I looked down in horror at three dark gray fingers clasp onto the bottom of the elevator floor.

Four fingers.

Two hands, six fingers.

Tom fumbled for his weapon as the elevator finally made its way to the next floor. A loud shriek came out of the anonymous form as the fingers slowly resigned. The sound of sinew and bones cracking and splitting was gut wrenching. Even more disturbing was the idea that whatever it was chasing us had the wherewithal to hold onto the floor long enough to have its flesh ripped into shreds.

Tom finally looked relaxed as we continued to climb.

My relationship with Tom was the same as my relationship with this shit-hole of a city. I hated it, but relied on it. Maybe, somewhere inside my cynical and numb interior, lied a deeper appreciation for this city, but I had never realized it.

Maybe I'd like Tom. If we ever got that far.

"This should take us to 54. If not, we can find stairs or a ladder." Tom said.

"As long as it doesn't involve running away from anything, I don't mind."

"How's your head?"

"Fine. It feels like someone removed my eyeballs and crammed manure inside, but otherwise, fine." I wasn't exaggerating.

"You should pull up that flap of skin over your right eye."

Tom was right. I had only been looking through one eye this entire time. Wiping my brow while I was running, I noticed the texture was slightly off. The skin above my eye had been ripped, and was hanging over. I carefully lifted the couple square inches of skin off of my eye and pivoted it into its proper position, on my forehead.

"Looks great. We can tape that up once we get to base."

"Base? We have a base now? So we're not just admiring the scenery anymore?" I wasn't sure if it was the headache, the stinging of having to place skin back into its proper place, or my general disliking of the current situation, but my temper was growing shorter.

"This will be the best place to be, pretty soon. Ample light, chance of rescue, and we can easily let anyone else on the ground know we're up here."

"Great. The more, the merrier."

I really hate the name Jake.

"We have enough supplies for a few weeks. We'll be able to collect rain for water. This is a good idea." Tom sounded like he was trying to convince himself, too.

Fifty two.

Tom put his face against the mesh to see more closely what was on the floors we were passing. The moon was doing a fairly good job at lighting the area.

Concrete blocks, tools, and bags of some sort of building material were strewn about. Ten days ago, this would have seemed like random crap. But right now, it felt like I had walked into Fort Knox. Tools meant the ability to make things.

And they said a degree in Engineering was boring. Suddenly, my six years of misery were starting to make sense.

Fifty three.

Tom looked apprehensive as the elevator stopped.

“Murphy’s law.” I said. Tom wasn’t impressed. Murphy’s law was one of the things we learned about in school. Out of all the laws I learned, it turned out Murphy knew more than Newton or Einstein.

The gate opened and we assumed our tactical position. I say tactical, but I would be lying if I said it wasn’t something we had just seen in the movies. We probably weren’t even doing it right. Tom took the left side as I focused on the right, and walked side by side forward into the dark.

Step, by step, we advanced. I noted areas that resembled something one of them could jump out of and ambush us, but in reality, it could happen anywhere and at any time.

From what I remembered, their ability to hear and see wasn’t any better than ours, thankfully. In that stead, we stayed quiet as we moved forward, looking for a ladder, or anything to get us to the last floor.

Silently, we both realized since the others had been here, they would have left clues or made it obvious on how to get up. We kept quiet as we continued looking for some way out of this burdened floor.

Tom slowed, and I followed suit. We approached a corner and began to take it. Suddenly, Tom jumped back and crowded into me, causing a fumble and resulting me dropping my weapon. After Tom placed a few wild shots, I quickly grabbed my Beretta and flattened myself against the wall next to Tom as he frantically grabbed at air, holding himself flat against the wall as well.

“I thought I saw something.” Tom managed to squeak out of his erratic breaths.

“Well, you handled it well enough. I think I’ll lead.” I didn’t know how to lead.

Apprehensively, I looked around the corner with the side of my face, and realizing there was nothing there. Even with this knowledge, it was increasingly difficult to move forward, but I managed to continue.

As we rounded the corner, a ladder in the distance came into view. I could barely make the shape of it out, but it was decidedly an implement to allow us to transcend floors, and that was okay with me.

Five feet after advancing from the corner, I had realized there was only one set of foot steps I could hear at this point, and quickly turned around to assess why the fuck Tom wasn't joining me in my bipedal symphony.

Tom laid on the ground, unconscious, as it grabbed me by the neck.

His gray eyes seemed to radiate from his nearly black face - bruised and grayed as if he'd been pummeled with rocks for hours. His clammy skin seemed even more bizarre, but it was mostly those eyes - those eyes seemed to stand out like quasars, pulsating, staring into me as if I wasn't there.

His grip tightened.

He was dark gray all over. Once white, but now gray. Like this city, deadened to a dull silhouette.

I began remembering what a concussion felt like, as everything started turning the same gray hue as his light-less skin.

I was losing consciousness again.

Darker.

I can't see much.

I could swear, that flick of the side of his lips looked startlingly like a smirk. But that would be absurd. They aren't sentient. They can't be sentient. They won't be sentient.

I can't see now.

But just before I lose it again, making a theme for the night, I hear a loud shot of gunfire and thud as my body quickly embraced the concrete floor. I quickly regained vision and saw the smirking face staring at me, on the concrete, blood oozing from his neck. His mouth moving in such a way to resemble a fish out of water, clasp at the last straws of life.

His eyes continued piercing mine, even after his smirk had faded into a lifeless form of muscles and skin tissues.

This would be the happiest I'd ever been to see Christine in my entire life, and I wasn't exactly disappointed with our previous encounters.



Christine ran over to Tom and shook him. Nothing. It must have knocked him unconscious somehow. She began dragging him the few feet over to me as I began to prop myself on my now weak arms.

She ran over to it, and started rolling him away from me, foot by foot, with the ball of hers. Once comfortable with the eight foot gap, she came over to me.

“Are you okay?”

“Don’t worry, the battle scar was before he got a hold of me.”

“I know.” Her confidence would have normally annoyed me, but right now it was mildly assuring.

“We have to get him up the ladder.”

I nodded. I got up and assisted her in carrying Tom over to the dust stained ladder. After climbing up to the 54th floor, I laid my torso down as she sheepishly handed me Tom’s arm. With every ounce of strength I could muster, I held on to him as she climbed the ladder, pushing up on his lifeless lower half as I pulled as hard as I could.

After Tom was safely on the 54th floor, Christine hurriedly joined me and began barricading the ladder entrance.

“Is this the only way up? I asked.

“There was scaffolding in a few areas, but I got rid of them.”

Christine was good at this.

“So we’re safe.”

“For now.” She answered.

With the impending sense of safety, my body relaxed and I sucked in the thick air, indulging in every molecule of oxygen as if it were to be my last. I marveled in the moment and let my exhaustion take hold of me.

Thoughts came.

When one regards the end of civilization, you imagine rifles, handguns, and chainsaws. Not calculators, botany proficiency, or human resources. The fact was, that after the bloody mist had settled, it took intelligent people, with the right tools, to make the world work again.

Never had I imagined it, but my pen and paper was my greatest tool. Soon, we would be delineating the most efficient way to maintain food resources, deal with waste, and master water purification.

Fighting them was only half of it, and we were now beginning to embark on the second part of our struggle.

Just as the world, thankfully, began to go dark again, I could notice Tom waking up. A slight sense of relief washed over me as Christine and the others began attending to him. They too, would indulge in their well deserved rest, very soon.

It's so dark - even with the light from the stars and moon shining down on us. This now treacherous city seemed just a little bit less horrible.

And in the stead of this new theme the city perpetrates, I followed suit.

And closed my eyes.

And it was dark.

# No More Room In Hell

by Draco122

## Chapter 1: Welcome to Central Park

The Streets of New York City were awash with noise, the sounds of sirens, screams of death and gunshots off in the distance. Fires raged in apartment buildings and office complexes, pitch black smoke only made it harder to see in the dead of night, the only lights being from those of the fires that raged.

Cars piled up on roads stretching on miles to a destination that always fell back to a dead end, a Military Checkpoint surrounded by America's finest soldiers, not to rescue but to send back the weary and injured survivors back into the Hell hole that had become New York.

The Undead was the cause of the chaos, they roamed the streets looking for fresh living victims, Looters taking what they can with Police Forces scrambling to get a hold of the situation, receiving no support from the outside Military forces that quarantined them inside the city, condemning them to a life of survival and fear.

And yet, there was a strange sense of tranquility in Central Park despite the chaos. Granted it still saw it's fair share of violence but even a place that seems peaceful on the outside can uphold a dark heart on the inside.

The calm and collected nature of the park made an inviting place for a Survivor wishing to escape the war torn streets of Manhattan, but those who would enter would realize their mistake. The Undead, always pursuing fresh prey made their way into the open Central Park and with very limited resources, it made it difficult for anybody to actively survive on their own.

Many fell to the Undead Hordes, overwhelmed by massive groups as they swarmed each human being as they attempted to flee only to trip up on debris attempting to run in and out of various terrain or become lost in smog that enveloped the park, a result from the mass fires that were erupting across the city.

Of course for some Survivors that escaped the city streets for the park thought they believed the park would hold an element of rescue, a military chopper waiting to escort them to safety, a Military "Evacuation Plan" in other words, like many a movie would often show in this situation. This was nothing more than false hope, a chopper that never existed nor would it come.

For one such individual, he found this out the Hard way. Darrel Hughes was a Mechanic working in an Auto-Shop within New York's Soho District, who had the idea of making his way to Central Park, with the intention of finding a Evacuation Zone that would otherwise not exist.

"Damn it!" he muttered under his breath, as he carefully made his way through the car blocked road on 59th Street, carefully creeping through the damaged fence of the South Central as he approached a nearby foot path leading further into the bleak expanse that laid before him.

His flashlight was running low, it's beam slowly starting to fade and flicker. "Come on you Chinese piece of crap!", said Darrel, as he slapped the side of the flashlight vigorously, attempting to get more power. Much of the Parks lights were disabled, save for a few that ran off their own electrical power fed via Generators or sporadically coming on.

"Why did I come on here! Can't see shit in this smog!" Said Darrel, the misty fog that enveloped the park made it difficult to spot any of the undead, only grey shambling figures with low incessant moaning could be heard.

Armed with nothing but his trusty pistol, a .45 caliber 1911 he hastily made his way along the footpath only to spot a flickering light in the distance, the only one he could actively see. As he slowly approached he began to see the signs of previous conflict.

Arriving on Park Drive he witnessed a sight he wished he hadn't, there laying before him was the wreckage of a burning Park Maintenance vehicle, the slow shambling moan of an Undead corpse, it's face unrecognizable from the burst flesh and the sickly stench of burning hair and skin, it slowly approached him, moaning incessantly at him, the gray figures slowly turning to approach Darrel's position.

"Shit!", muttered Darrel, witnessing the impossible feat that lay before him. Opting for a quick removal and as an act of mercy, he took aim with his pistol and fired, a square shot to the forehead as the mass of burning skin and bone fell to the floor with a wallop, his body burning away. Looking around him, seeing gray figures approach him steadily through the smog, he made his move, running for the nearest opportunity to escape the slow approaching horde.

There he spotted light, it was faint through the fog, but Darrel went for it. With each step he took, with every yard he ran, the light got stronger and stronger. Eventually he came across a block building, a bright shining light next to it.

It was one of the Public Restrooms, seeing no other alternative and desperately needing a place to collect his thoughts, he ran over to the stone concrete washrooms, entering the narrow corridor and slamming the door behind him. With his flashlight on it's last legs, he scans the room he's in, apart from a few broken stalls, he spots a first aid cabinet in the corner.

"Damn, why did I come here? It was just too good to be true", muttered Darrel, the thought of not seeing any Military or police presence becoming worrying to his sense of mind. Thoughts ran through his head, each one being filtered only to come up with nothing.

He checked himself over, apart from a few scrapes from the bushes he crawled through he could spot not spot any bite marks or signs of

clawing from the undead. He checked his Pistol, 5 rounds and only a few bullets to spare.

It was then he heard the banging of the door. The Undead had found him and they were hungry for his flesh.

## **Chapter 2: Decisive Action**

Darrel had to think fast, the undead were closing in and with no windows around the restroom the situation looked bleak for him. It was hard to tell how many undead souls were outside, the room in which he stayed made a collective banging echo, the more the undead pounded away at the steel door it effectively turned this otherwise minor building into a perpetual deathtrap. To the undead, they were merely ringing the dinner bell.

He looked around the room, to spot something in the corner of his eye, a hatch in the roof. "Excellent" he thought to himself, Gathering whatever supplies he could, stuffing them into his pockets as he made his way over to the nearby stall. He clambered up the toilet and onto the stall itself, unstable from having a full grown man stand on the edge of the thin stall wall. The hatch was unlocked but stiff and heavy, years of neglect had left it to rust in the weather, the hinges making a sharp screech as he forced it open, echoing heavily in the room further causing more incessant moans from the outside.

With a final heave he forced it open, the hatch making a clang as it flopped back on the roof above. As he climbed out into the open, he was free from the deathtrap but now he could really see just how noisy that place was. It was no more than a few minutes that he stayed inside and already he had amassed a small group, the surrounding walls covered in undead, groping and touching the walls attempting to reach him while a burly zombie banged against the door trying to get inside. Despite the door being a steel door, the noise it generated inside was so loud it was bringing the undead in like flies.

"Great... out of the frying pan... into the fire" Said Darrel, as he peered over the edge of the building, watching the undead claw and scream at him, desperately trying to get at the fresh meat before them.

He had to get away, he may have been on the roof but the constant banging noise would only attract more of the undead. He looked around and spotted a branch to the left of him. There was a small amount of zombies around that area but seeing no other alternative, he took the chance. He jumped into the nearby brush of the tree branch, latching onto it as he swung to the floor below. It was enough to slow his fall but it still hurt him as he hit the floor with a loud thud.

Undead that were close to him moaned and groaned, attracting more to his position. With a quick breath, he bolted to the nearest thing he could see, open space, they may have been slow but they were quick to close the gap between him and them.

In a short time frame Darrel had avoided most if not all the group, he could still hear their moaning in distance and the figures all but remained as dark black blobs in the mist that surrounded the park. He

panted and wheezed, he wasn't exactly the fittest person in world afterall, catching his breath he realized, he didn't know where he was. Looking around look the same until he spotted a light in the distance, it was moving.

It was hard to say what it was but he approached it with caution. In the few minutes that had passed he followed the light, but was sorely disappointed with what he found. There before him lay a slow shambling torch, a Zombie who was engulfed in a slow burning flame. He looked at it carefully, it had no eyes, most of it's facial features had been either burned or chewed off, blood dripping everywhere as it walked. Despite this it did help by giving him the light to spot the path it was walking down, in which Darrel had made the progressive travels along the misty paths, avoiding whatever contact he could.

Darrel must have been navigating the paths for some time now, the mist, a collection of smog from the burning city and the condensation from the wet grass of the parks watering system made visibility poor at best.

Before long he spotted something in the distance, another Public Restroom, taking caution to the wind he avoided it like the one he just escaped, but not without spotting it's carnage that lay before it. Looks like he wasn't the only one to seek shelter from these public restrooms, but sadly it's occupants were far less lucky than Darrel, the door had been wrenched loose with blood and guts strewn about the area, decaying bodies with smashed skulls lead Darrel to believe the survivors inside gave some resistance, for how futile it was.

Bullet casings were strewn about with bloodied footprints giving chase. He wasn't the only survivor in the park that much was certain, something he was glad to know but also was fearful. Where they survivors? Or could they be a band of looters seeking shelter in the tranquility of Central Park, praying on others to survive? Who knows, all Darrel knew was survival and while he respected their attempts, he knew he would sooner shoot dead the nearest looter that would attack him.

He followed the path before him, before long he spotted several lights in the distance, deciding to investigate he approached with haste. He knew this action may have been foolish but he knew that staying along the park was good as dead and for all he knew, it might have been a bastion of safe haven or another perpetual deathtrap. He wasn't known for rash decisions, but was quick on his feet and had a sharp eye, he may have been lacking in fitness and healthy well being but it was good sign that he was still alive and kicking.

There before him as he came out from the mist, he knew what it was. Central Park Zoo, checking the magazine of his 1911 and chambering a round, he approached with caution, not knowing what he'd encounter...

### **Chapter 3: Nigel...**

Darrel approached the bloodied steps of Central Park Zoo, "what a mess" he mumbled to himself. It was quiet within the zoo, no sounds of animals in their cages nor the sight of any possible escapee's. He saw

only death, blood but no bodies, personal items laying before him. A moment of sadness drooped over him as he spotted a bloodied stuffed animal. The undead were Merciless, having no compassion or emotion, killing for food, killing for instinct.

As he continued he found the source of the light. It was coming from the Arsenal, a symmetrical brick building used as a storehouse for arms and ammunition in the mid 1800's, converted to an office building for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation as well as a museum. Naturally as he approached he found the doors locked, seeing no other alternative he approached the size, climbing atop several bins before smashing a window with a nearby brick.

Inside it was dark, only a glimmer of light remained from the top floor, it was enough to guide him but Darrel was cautious, more so than ever, not only did he break in but he also alerted anyone inside of his presence.

He approached out into the hallway, despite the carnage that showed outside, the place was relatively tidy, a few spots of spilt coffee and papers laying around but nothing too much out of the ordinary.

As he approached the stairs he made his way up, the clatter of his footsteps against the floor was nerve racking to him but he continued on, his pistol at the ready. As he approached the top of his steps, he froze.

Before him was a massacre, bullet holes and a myriad of corpses all with shots to the head but that was not his reason for stopping. Before him he could hear the soft munch of teeth against flesh, something was feeding and it was close. He peered over the edge of the steps and to his right was three individuals bent over feasting on a victim. Blood and guts were being torn apart from this unlucky individual as Darrel had gone un-noticed. He needed the place to be clear, so he took another rash action.

"HEY!" He shouted at the three corpses in front of him standing amongst the bodies. He took aim, eye level with them, the safety on his pistol disengaged, he was ready. The first one crept up and gave a sinister roar, like a wild animal it charged. He had seen these one's before, this one was fresh, rigor mortis hadn't quite set in yet so it could still move quickly. He took aim and with a quick pull of the trigger, he landed his first shot to the Zombie's cranium.

The other two approached, as he fired more shots at the slow shambling corpses. The second Zombie took a few hits, a bullet cutting through it's throat as it bled out what remaining blood remained, the third keeling over quickly as a bullet blew apart a piece of it's head. The second one kept coming as Darrel scrambled to reload, he couldn't believe he fired all 7 shots. He had no fresh magazines and while he fumbled with the bullets, the Zombie lurched forward and grabbed forcing him to the floor.

He wrestled and wrenched with the undead foe as he clubbed it with his pistol, attempting to get it off. He thought it was over, his rash decision costing his life. It wasn't until the Zombie reeled backwards,

and above laid a woman clutching a pipe. She stood there, bloodied and torn, she looked almost like a nurse, carrying a black backpack.

"Are you okay?" She said, looking down at Darrel. Her eyes said concern but her expression said hurry. "Yeah... I'm fine" Said Darrel as the girl looked down the corridor to the corpse. "Come on, we can't stay here, I'll take you to Nigel" she said as she offered Darrel a helping hand, pulling him back up to his feet.

They walked down the hall, past the fallen bodies, Darrel could really see the damage that they had caused. "So... What's your name?" said Darrel as the duo walked down the hall. "My name's Sarah, I'm a Veterinary Nurse for the Zoo, you?" Said Sarah as she hopped over the strew of dead bodies walking further down the hall. "Darrel, Darrel Hughes, Mechanic".

"Like to get your hands dirty huh" She giggled as she pulled a key out of her pocket, opening an Office door. "I'd put your gun away if I was you, especially on your first meeting" She said as she slowly opened the door, Darrel complied, putting the safety on his gun as he shoved into the back of his jeans.

He entered an old office, stacks of papers and documents lined the desk and shelves as he walked in, as he followed Sarah into the next room. There he saw a man, peering out the window, dressed in a green jacket and grey trousers, holding a pair of binoculars as he peered across the green, a rifle laying beside him.

"Nigel?" Said Sarah, her voice concerned and fearful, Nigel turned, his eyes going wide as he calmly reached for his Hunting rifle. "Nigel, I found another Survivor..." Said Sarah but before she could react he turned around, he was a burly man, holding a rifle in his hands he looked at Darrel, glancing him over, he mumbled something to himself but kept his distance and beckoned Sarah over to him.

"You armed?" He said with a deep voice, his finger close to the trigger. "I am, but I'm not looking for trouble...", Said Darrel, raising both his hands in the air. "I see... Sarah found you then?, Where?" Said Nigel, his eyes had that cold look in them, saying that he didn't want anything nasty.

"Didn't you hear the gunshots out in the Hall?" Said Darrel, "I did... but I chose not to check, for all I knew you were just another looter, a piece of rat shit scum" Said Nigel, his face contorting as he spoke. Darrel didn't want to mess with him, he wanted his trust. "So erh... who or what are you? Some sort of cop?" He said pointing to Nigel's Jacket.

Nigel glanced over to his arm patch and with his free hand pointed to the symbol on his arm. "New York City Park Ranger pal... we may not be cops but we don't take shit from anybody you hear..." He said with a disgruntled tone. "Nigel! He safe, he cleared the hall outside" Said Sarah, clutching her pipe tightly. "That so... How many were there?" Said Nigel, clutching his rifle tightly.

"Three, there were three of 'em out there" Said Darrel; "What were they wearing?" Said Nigel, he was obviously looking for answers. "Two



wearing regular clothes, partially torn and bloodied and another one wearing a jacket like yours". His face contorted, he closed his eyes in disgust. "Damn..." He said, Sadness in his voice.

"Something wrong?" Said Darrel, showing concern. Nigel shook his head and turned back to the window, slinging his rifle over his shoulder as he peered through the Binoculars again. "Nothing... it's... Nothing" he said, concentrating on the window ahead of him.

"Sorry about him, he keeps to himself mostly but he's really a nice guy!" Said Sarah, as she sat down taking the backpack off and unzipping it. "I picked up some food and Supplies from the Cafeteria and also grabbed that Map you were talking about" Said Sarah, pulling out a few tins of beans and Snack Food while clutching a rolled up piece of paper.

"Let me see it" Said Nigel, taking the paper and rolling it out on a nearby desk. It was a map of the park, a lot of small scribbles had been made on it in black ink as he tracked the path up and past several areas.

"Here, the Art Museum, according to the notes scribbled here, they moved the Radio to the room on the second floor in a Storage room, the passcode for it must be inside the museum" Said Nigel as he peered over to Sarah. "Radio? So we can actually call for help?" Said Darrel approaching Nigel and looking at the map.

"Yeah... we can take this road here, normally it wouldn't take long but with everything that's going on..." Said Nigel, looking at the map. "Yeah I can see it being longer... but are you sure we can make it on foot?" Said Darrel.

"No... we'd never make it on foot, with that many zombies out there it would take us 45 minutes to an hour at most, but there's a utility cart we can use to get there faster, cut it down to 10 to 15 minutes at most" Said Nigel.

"You got a car?" Said Darrel surprised and joyful but Nigel merely looked at him. "I said it's a utility cart or just a Golf cart to some, I don't even know if it still runs" Said Nigel, a look of annoyance on his face.

"Darrel didn't you say you were a mechanic? If anything's wrong we can use your skills to get it up and running" Said Sarah; Nigel perked up, smiling as he clutched his rifle and rolled up the map as he turned to face Darrel, "Huh I guess you can be useful after all pal, well I better kit you out, you're gonna need it!"

#### **Chapter 4: Not so cuddly Teddy Bear**

Nigel led Darrel to a locked box in the back of the room. "Here you better stock up, I grabbed these before making my way up here" Said Nigel, undoing the latch and opening the box. Inside was an array of firearms and ammunition, they weren't machine guns or rocket launchers but they'd more than suffice for the task at hand.

"Sarah you too, I'll show you how to use them" As Nigel beckoned Sarah over to him, passing her a Double Barreled Shotgun. "But... I've never fired a gun in my life!" Said Sarah, clutching the shotgun in her arms. "It's easy, I'll show, Darrel is it? Help yourself to the guns and ammo, we gonna need you" Said Nigel as he approached Sarah, showing her how to operate the Shotgun.

Darrel merely nodded and approached the crate, inside was an array of firearms and ammo, some of it was mis-matched but he found what he wanted. He took what he could out of the box, a Ruger 10/22 in .22 caliber with a full box .22 caliber rounds, 'Remington golden bullet' according to the box. Despite no finding a .45, he found 17 rounds in a moldy old box, the only words intelligible were 'Privi'.

"Surely you can give me a different gun Nigel! I was able to move quicker with just this pipe" Said Sarah as she complained to Nigel, sighing in frustration he place a hand on his face as he looked at her, "Sarah... look, this is no time to picky, I've showed what I could okay?" Said Nigel. "Here, take this gun instead, WAY lighter" As Darrel handed over his .22 in exchange for Sarah's shotgun.

"You sure you know how to use that?" Beckoned Nigel as he glanced over to Darrel, "If I can handle a 45 Nigel I can handle a 12 gauge" he said, matching Nigel's condescending tone. Nigel merely frowned and continued past Sarah near the door, pulling out a silver revolver and checking the cylinder, "You ready?" Said Nigel as he slapped the cylinder in his revolver.

The trio made their way out of the the office and approached down the hall, as they neared the groups of bodies Nigel slowed down and peered down at the one corpse. He bent down to check the body, sifting through the pockets "You okay?" Said Darrel, Nigel didn't answer nor did he look at him.

"Hey Sarah, I know we gotta be quick but who was that guy Nigel's searching?" Said Darrel, a puzzled look on his face but Sarah's expression change to something of sadness. "Jack, his name was Jack, he was Nigel's partner, I don't want to talk about it..." as she made her way down the stairs.

Nigel passed Darrel, he swore he could see him shed a tear but he refused to show it. As the trio went down to the main floor, Nigel readied his Revolver, rifle slung on his back as he approached the main door. He signaled Darrel and Sarah and they made their way out of the door. Surprisingly they met little to no resistance.

"Beware of the bear's", said Nigel as the trio hurried along the path, hearing the moans off in the distance from the undead. "Bears!? What Bears!" Said Darrel, his eyes wide from the news. "Jessie and Ben, our resident Polar Bear's escaped during the Chaos, poor thing's, probably in shock, some of ours guys reported that Ben escaped started to attack the people around the park, Jessie I don't know about" said Sarah.

Within a few minutes the trio made their way to the garage lock-up, a concrete building with two large metal shutters, Nigel approached the side of the door and opened it with a bloodied key, likely off of Jack from the Arsenal Building.

"It should be inside here" Said Nigel, fumbling with the Key. Within the building it was dark, Nigel flicked the lights but one exploded from an overload and the other flickered, grabbing a flashlight from his belt, he signaled Darrel to check the area as he scanned his light across the room, Sarah standing behind him.

In front of him was two the utility carts and when Nigel scanned the light across them he could see that one was defiantly out, with it's broken frame and chassis, flat tires and broken steering wheel. When Nigel scanned across the shelves and chests, he spotted a lantern and made his way to it.

Darrel bent down next to a table and pulled out an Electric lantern, where he lit it up, a soft hum emanation from it, lighting the room in a soft white glow. "Let's take a look at this here" Said Darrel, bending down near one the Utility cart's.

"Okay, suspension looks good, tires and traction's okays, Fuel line's good... bout the only thing this thing needs is a new spark plug, a new battery and a fan belt but I can scavenge some bits from that other one over there" Said Darrel as he headed over to the broken down cart, the hood of the cart refused to open but Nigel handed him a nearby crowbar allowing him to wrench it loose.

"This shouldn't take too long, do you know how open the shutters?" Asked Darrel, as Nigel merely nodded in return and headed over to a crank in the corner of the room, covered up by boxes. "Right here, we use this whenever the Electric goes out" Said Nigel, pointing to the Crank.

Half an hour had passed, Darrel had his covered in black grease, sorting through the messy engine of the cart. "I thought you said it wouldn't take long?" said Nigel, tapping the button of his gun. "Yeah... I did, unfortunately I'm not used to this carts, the engines are hard to reach in" said Darrel, poking a wrench through a hard to reach gap to tighten in the spark plug. With a thud, he closed the hood of the cart over the engine. "All set!" Said Darrel, wiping his hands on a piece of cloth.

Suddenly there was a large roar, followed by several moans and the crashing of objects outside. Within an instant, the door shifted in it's wake, a large dent appearing the thin steel. "What the hell is that!" Said Sarah, grabbing her backpack and Rifle pointing it at the door. Nigel and Darrel both aimed their weapons at it as it burst open, tearing off from it's hinges hitting Darrel and Nigel as it swung open.

There before them stood a large 900lb polar bear bearing it's blood soaked fangs and matted white fur as it roared at the Trio. Sarah fired several shots to no avail, her pitifully weak .22 caliber rifle barely penetrating it's hide and only serving to annoy it. Nigel scrambled for his rifle but the bear grabbed his leg and pulled him in close, he screamed in a panic as he desperately tugged at his revolver swatting his hands left and right, kicking and screaming as the bear attempted to maul him.

Darrel swiftly took aim and fired a shot, the shotgun blast taking a chunk of it's shoulder as it roared and screeched in pain, Nigel scrambling away as he pulled his revolver and fired shots into the beast's stomach, causing it reel backwards and roar and whelp in pain. It toppled and collapsed to the floor, where Darrel finished it off with a close range blast to the head. It roared a soft gurgle as blood and bits of skull and flesh left it's body as it spasmed in it's slow death strokes.

"Jesus..." Said Nigel, examining his boot, besides blood from the bear he remained relatively un-harmed, if a little bruised from the door. "It's Ben... poor guy, he never liked noise... that moaning must've made him insane" said Sarah as he leaned back on a nearby wall.

"Nigel, you hurt?" Said Darrel lending a hand to him, "No... I'd never thought I'd face a polar bear in a Zombie Apocalypse" he said, panting from the shock. "Come on you two, we better get going, that noise is gonna attract alot of attention" said Darrel, lifting Nigel up and heading over to the cart.

In only but a moment the Sarah and Nigel boarded the cart while Darrel operated the crank to the door. As it made it's slow rising creak, Zombies were already fast approaching. As the cart whizzed into action and quickly parking outside, Sarah fired a few shots at the approaching shambling bodies, the bullets having little to no effect. "Sarah! If your gonna shoot them, shoot 'em in the head!" shouted Nigel, as he waved over to Darrel.

As Darrel ran over, he noticed a Zombie, half mauled with a leg missing attempting to crawl up the back of cart. With a quick kick he knocked it down and fired his shotgun into the face of nearby zombie, splattering it's brains and bits of bone in all directions. "Hurry!" shouted Sarah, as Darrel boarded the cart and with a loud screech the cart zoomed off into the distance, the show shambling corpses, giving chase.

## **Chapter 5: Safe Haven**

The cart zoomed down the road, passing several undead. "You two okay back there?" Said Nigel, as he pressed on the gas. "Just peachy!" Shouted Sarah, she was shivering from the cold air that blasted past her, wearing on a blue shirt and some skinny jeans weren't exactly the best outfit for a cold drive in the park.

Darrel shared his coat with her, letting her cover her up from the cold. "Not far now" Nigel shouted, the Cart was going full speed and Nigel had a good hand in steering the thing, despite being a golf cart.

"So Nigel, tell me, I thought park rangers don't carry guns?" said Darrel, peering next to Nigel. "We don't, these guns were what I scavenged from a locker in the basement of the Arsenal building, we keep 'em around in-case one of the bear's get out or there's unruly business in the park, plus the .22 Sarah's got is used for pest control" Nigel explained, the fog and mist slowly cleared and trio could really spot the devastation in the distance as they went along the road.

In far corners of buildings, fires erupted, smoke blocked out most of the night time sky, only a small glint made it through. "My god..." said Sarah, shocked at the devastation before them. "Don't... it's a lot worse" Said Darrel as he looked to the floor, clutching his shotgun. "How do you know?" Said Nigel, curious.

"Between here and Soho, it's a warzone, Looters, rioters, gangs and undead looking for blood; what would normally only take 15 minutes, took me an hour to get out and get down here" Explained Darrel. "So what made you come down here then?" Said Nigel.

"I thought there might be a military rescue team, have you ever seen those monster movies? They always use a central park or somewhere important as a base, I was wrong about it, they'd be way more security about" Said Darrel.

"I wouldn't take movies too seriously, Central Park is too open and besides I'd think they'd want to contain the outbreak first rather than rescue" Said Nigel. "What makes you say that?", Darrel asked with a confused look.

"I used to be a Marine, Staff Sergeant, served in Iraq, did 2 years there before I got my leg shot up by an IED, the Military would be more concerned with containment first, that's what the National Guard are doing around the borders of the City, their quarantining us" Nigel explained. He seemed to know alot so his words had truth in them.

"So what do you hope to accomplish with finding this radio?" Darrel asked, a sense of further confusion and worry filling his head. "I know some people inside the military, they might be able to get us out, but I won't know that until I can reach that Radio!" said Nigel, the look of hope in his eyes.

A few minutes passed and the cart slowed down, the road becoming bumpy and un-even something had went down here. "Why are we slowing down" said Darrel, looking at Nigel. "Something's come down here, looks big" Said Nigel, looking at the wreckage it became clear to him. It was wreckage from a Helicopter.

Within a few moments the trio stopped, parking on a ridge. "Where are we?" said Nigel, peering over to Sarah. "We're due east of Turtle Pond" said Sarah glancing at the map. "Why are we stopping, shouldn't we head to Art Museum" Said Darrel concern written all across his face.

"We should but maybe we can scavenge some radio parts, frequencies from the Radio within the crash." Said Nigel. Cooperating with his request, Darrel reluctantly stepped out, turning the safety off on his shotgun as Nigel and Darrel approached the crash site. "Sarah, stay in the cart, warn us if anything comes around" Said Nigel, Sarah giving a nod.

As Darrel and Nigel approached the scene their lay the damaged remains of a chopper, it's doors and tail rotor had been shot to bits, it's door flung open and hanging from it's hinges, corpses lay there partially burnt. "I know these holes, 7,62 NATO, it was shot down..." Nigel explained, his face turned bleak. "Shot down, they're shooting Civi's down!" shouted Darrel, with the expression of surprise and shock.

Nigel walked over and checked the corpse, dressed in SWAT Armor, next to it laid a rifle. "M16A4, 5,56 NATO, half empty... there's loads of casings in the cabin" explained Nigel. "So are you suggesting they shot at a Military Chopper!?" Darrel said with concern. "It was probably out of desperation, they were most likely asked to land or be fired upon, I guess one of these guy's took the chance and fired on them..." said Nigel.

Darrel approached the crash site, examining the corpses while Nigel climbed inside. "Damn it!" Cursed Nigel, placing his hand against his cheek, "Radio's shot to shit!" he cursed again, looking at Darrel his expression was clear, this was gonna be tough to get out of this nightmare. "I've looked over the bodies, two magazines for the M16 and a Pistol" Said Nigel, handing over the magazines and pistol to Nigel. He checked them over, two full magazines 5,56 and Beretta 92.

Suddenly there was shouting from up above, the undead had caught up. Sarah was firing slow, careful shots at the undead, a few dropping with repeated hits from her 22. "Guys! Guys!!! Hurry, they're coming!", shouted Sarah. A slow mob approaching her from the south.

Darrel and Nigel rushed over, as Nigel shoved whatever he could into his pockets, fumbling with the gear. Darrel arrived on scene, shooting the first zombie close to Sarah with a blast from his shotgun, the shot causing it fall like a sack of shit. A second shot ringed out, planting a spray of buckshot into a dead corpse coming for his right.

Nigel appeared and run over to the Cart, he turned the key as he heard the cart shudder and rev. It wasn't starting! "Start you Chinese piece of crap!" Shouted Nigel as he turned the key again and again. Darrel reloaded his shotgun, while Sarah was plugging away with her 22, the bullets may have been weak but the undead still fell with repeated hits.

"I'm out!" Shouted Darrel, as he pulled out his pistol and plugged a few rounds into the nearest zombie. "Get this thing started! I'll cover you!" Shouted Nigel in return as the two swapped seats, Darrel popped his pistol in his pocket as he turned the key to get the same startup from the motor.

Nigel took aim with his rifle as a shot rang out, striking a nearby zombie with a headshot, pulling back the bolt on his rifle chambering a new round only to fire it a second later, striking a second zombie. He repeated his steps, with each shot he fired, every zombie fell to the floor with a bullet in it's head, one by one.

With a sudden rev of energy from the Motor, the cart stated "Nigel! Get on!", Darrel shouted. Nigel hopped onto the back as he continued to plug away with his now freshly loaded rifle, as Sarah also did, firing away with her 22's. Bullets were flying and heads were popping as they pulled away.

"Damn that was close" Said Nigel, whipping the sweat from his forehead. "You okay back there?" Said Darrel, looking back at the duo "I'm fine bu... LOOKOUT!" screamed Sarah, Darrel looked around and with a surprise in front of them was Zombie as it collided in the front.

Darrel lost control the cart as it swerved and tipped over on it's side.

The Zombie was still clawing at Darrel as he pulled the pistol from his pocket and planted it firmly on the Zombies forehead, pulling the trigger as it blasted it's brains onto a nearby wall. "Everyone okay!" Shouted Nigel, coughing as sputtering. "I'm good..." Said Darrel peering over to Sarah. "Where's Sarah!?" Said Nigel before a scream was heard as they crawled out of the cart, Sarah was in the middle of road, holding her rifle as she attempted to crawl away.

"Sarah!" Shouted Nigel, as Darrel took aim with his pistol, firing a shot out that struck the Zombies shoulder. "Damn, can't get a clear shot!" shouted Darrel, Nigel pulled the Revolver from his holster as he aimed carefully and with a pull of a trigger, fired, a loud bang was heard followed by the splattering of a skull. He nailed the Zombie with a crisp and clean headshot, one that echoed far and wide, splattering brain matter in all directions as it's head exploded like a watermelon.

"I'm here, I'm here" Said Darrel as he limped over to a crying Sarah, she was sobbing as she held onto Darrel tightly. Soon though they had to move, a larger crowd was forming around them. Nigel ran back to the cart, grabbing the bag from Cart as he rushed back. Darrel carried Sarah back with him, loading some fresh bullets into his 45.

"We'll have to go the rest of the way on foot, we're not that far!" Said Nigel, blood dripping from his cheek from a scratch from the crash, everyone at that point had cuts and bruises on them.

"There I can see it! The Art Museum, we're almost there Sarah!" Darrel Shouted, clutching Sarah as they hobbled across the green, being chased by a mob of Zombies. "Get back you assholes!" Shouted Nigel, firing random shots from the M16 he collected from the crash site.

They climbed the steps as Nigel stood on at the top. "Darrel! Get the Doors!" Shouted Nigel, as shots rang out as he fired on the approaching mob. He loaded Sarah's rifle as he laid her next to a pillar, "Sarah, help Nigel I'm going to get the door's open" He said alarmed, as Sarah weakly nodded, as Darrel ran off to the large doors that were in front of him.

Meanwhile, Nigel was firing rounds off at the Undead, they had amassed a sizeable group at this point, as each bullet struck one Zombie another two appeared from the group, Nigel cursing and swearing as he backed up, emptying round after round of ammo from the M16. He was firing in it's semi-automatic mode, to conserve what little ammo he had for it. Sarah meanwhile fired what few rounds she had at the zombies that approached him, she helped somewhat.

"Nigel to your right!" She shouted as a Zombie appeared from the slowly amassing mob. He blasted it with his M16 as it reeled backward as he ran up the steps, narrowly avoiding a close grab from the undead mob.

Darrel came back, firing a round from his 45 into a zombie that was close to nigel as it struck it in the forehead as he bent down to pick Sarah up. "Come on! I got a door open but I'll need help to close it!" Shouted Darrel as the trio made a break for it into the Museum.

Panting and wheezing, the trio made it inside as Darrel dropped the wounded Sarah to the floor as he rushed to help Nigel close the door. With a hard thud the door closed and Nigel slammed the emergency lock across, along all the doors to prevent them from getting in. They were safe, for now.

## **Chapter 6: Where to Now?**

"I am sorry..." Darrel said as he glanced at Sarah's wound, she had a gash across her leg which made it difficult for her to walk. "Darrel please, it's okay, it's only a shallow cut!" Said Sarah giving him some sense of remorse for his earlier action. Nigel was quite, he knew Darrel messed up but he knew he would need the confidence in himself if he and the rest of them were gonna live.

Sarah managed to patch herself up with a first aid kit as Darrel looked around the hall. "Pretty big... alotta rooms around here" Said Darrel as he approached the main reception desk. The undead were banging at the doors, but the hardened reinforced doors prevented any of them coming through.

"So Nigel, we got to the Museum, where do we stand in all this?" Said Darrel as looked on to Nigel. "The notes said that the Radio was in a storage room on the second floor but the code was given to the caretaker, Barry" explained Nigel. Darrel loaded a few fresh bullets into his 45 as he rummaged through the bag for some shotgun shells for his shotgun, grabbing a chocolate bar in the process.

"You know where this 'Barry' is?" Said Darrel as he opened up the candy bar and taking a bite out of it. "Yeah... he lives here, the Director here doesn't know it but Barry lives in a small coven on the 5th floor, he'll have the keys and passcodes but only I know where his little hidey hole is" Said Nigel, tapping the buttstock of his M16.

"Okay, so we make our way to the 5th floor" Darrel said, cocking the slide of his 1911. "What supplies do we have?" Asked Darrel throwing the bag to Nigel. He sifted through the bag grabbing the few boxes of ammo inside and laying out the rest of the stuff onto the information's desk.

"Okay... ammo wise we're not doing good, for your shotgun Darrel you got 9 shots, 5 birdshot with 3 buck and 1 slug. For Sarah she's got 30 of the 22 rimfire out of the 100 she had before. I've got 11 rounds of .308 Winchester with 8 rounds of .357 Magnum" explained Nigel pointing to each of the ammo types laying before the trio.

"What about the guns we collected from Crash site?" asked Darrel, Nigel sighed before raising the M16 and pulling out the magazine as he slapped it back in and reached in for the pistol. "We got a full, freshly loaded mag of 5,56 rounds for the M16 and 10 rounds of 9mm for the Beretta, thats it for those two" exclaimed Nigel, shaking his head. "We also got a flashlight, two flares and some junk food" said Nigel, pointing to the two flares especially.



"Well thats it then, we better get going, Rescue ain't gonna come for us if we sit here all night", Said Darrel as he looked ahead at the stairs of the Museum.

# Dead or Dying

by Punisher

The horde had finally broken through our barricade and was slowly clawing and scraping its way upstairs. I could feel the sweat beading up on my forehead and starting to drip down from my chin. Was this how it was going to end? An empty clip in my left hand and one bullet left in the chamber of my .40 caliber pistol. My hand started to shake as I lifted the gun to my head. I looked down outside the window. The cold, rainy night in New York City had not turned out the way we had hoped...

It was August 5th of 2010 and the outbreak had already started. My roommate and I decided that it was no longer safe to just stay inside and wait it out any longer. There were screams coming from downstairs on the first floor. Apparently no one had bothered to block the main entrance and it proved to be fatal for the woman being attacked inside the apartment complex. "Matt hurry up, Let's go!" Jake shouted from down the hallway. "I'm almost ready hang on!" I replied. Quickly throwing some water bottles and protein bars into my backpack was all that held me back from rushing out into the hallway to join my best friend and roommate in what would be the start of a long and terrifying journey through the streets of New York. It so happened that I was more concerned about my lack of weaponry than us barreling outside into what could be an insurmountable force of the undead. But we had to do something because we were no longer safe if those things started boxing us in through the main entry. With no way to fight them off we would surely be an early snack for the deadheads in no time. "It's about time dude," Jake complained as I ran down the hallway after putting on my backpack. "Sorry about that but you'll thank me later today for the food and water." Jake just smiled and raised his wooden baseball bat at the ready.

As we walked downstairs we could already smell the chaos. We didn't want to know exactly what was going on but we peered into the bottom hall anyway. Blood was on the carpet and the paintjob was completely ruined due to the walls being stained. There were indents in the wall from someone trying to kill a few zombies that had gotten inside. A hammer was left lying on the ground next to the back door. "Hey Jake I'm gonna grab that hammer so get my back." I told him. "Alright go it's clear," He agreed. I ran down the hall and picked up the hammer. It was in pretty bad shape but one weapon was better than no weapons. All of the sudden a woman burst out a door blindsiding me. I was knocked down from the force of it hitting the back of the head. Jake was swinging the bat over and over again taking her down with a few crushing blows to the head. As I started to regain my composure I looked back at what had taken me down. My buddy stood over the corpse of a female zombie with a caved in skull. "Thanks Jake I owe you one pal," I muttered with a sense of shock and pain. "No problem Matt. Just don't run so fast next time, it was hard to keep up with you." I glanced back at him and realized that I was overzealous when I bolted down the hall to snatch that hammer. "Well I'll be fine and thanks for asking by the way," I sarcastically added.

We checked the front entrance and the room that the zombie came out of. It appeared that more zombies were starting to notice the noise and smell us from outside, so the front was too dangerous to risk an escape. I cautiously checked the apartment room

and found a kitchen knife. "Sweet! I've got a hammer and a knife now so I should be good to go," I let Jake know. "Let's get the hell out here Matt they're coming in through the front door!" Jake urged. Fortunately my knife was bigger than any of the ones I had in our kitchen upstairs. It didn't make me feel any safer but I knew that I'd need it sooner or later. "You take point this time," I told him. He opened the back door slowly checking both sides of the parking lot. It was clear so he motioned for me to follow him and we quietly jogged through and reached the alleyway that led to the main street. Two zombies spotted us that were close to the alley and started walking forward while moaning deeply. "Great, it's not even twelve o'clock and we're going to be knee deep in zombie guts before this day is over," Jake commented and then sighed. "Well at least I can take one of them this time," I said. "I'll take the cop on the left and you take the shorter guy on the right," he ordered. I went along with it. It felt really awkward cutting down a short zombie since I was over six feet tall in height. Nevertheless, Jake and I swung and stabbed like we were attacking a piñata from both sides with a crazy look in our eyes. Except instead of candy raining down we were feeling cold body parts fall to the ground. "Hey check that cop's pockets and I'll check out the patrol car out here," I quickly suggested. "Alright finally something good!" Jake exclaimed as he took a .38 special six-shooter out of the policeman's holster. "Looks like we've got 14 bullets here. Not too shabby." He added. "What's in the car Matt? I hope there's more ammo in there." I looked inside the car checking the street first to make sure there weren't any more flesh eaters on the way. "Well we're not going to be lucky enough to drive our way out of here. He ran out of gas for it. But wait a minute here..." I looked down next to the patrol car and to my surprise there was a twelve-gauge shotgun and a few shells on the ground that hadn't been fired yet. "Come to papa baby here we go!" I said with a big grin on my face. "This is gonna blow their heads off!" Jake looked over at me after reloading the .38 and cheered "Booyah Matt Dogg, those zombies are in trouble now!" "Hey this is good enough but it gets better man, check this out, we've got some Molotov cocktails in here with a lighter and some extra ammo for your gun. Too bad there aren't any more shotgun shells though," I explained. In total we had collected a shotgun with six shots left, thirty-four rounds for the pistol, three Molotov cocktails, and one duty belt that I let Jake carry since it appropriately had the holster for his gun.

As we looked down the main street outside of the apartments we saw a small horde of zombies still gathering in number and pressing in through the doorway. Some of our neighbors that lived there weren't as lucky as we had been. "Okay let me just stick the rest of my equipment into my bag here and we can head downtown before it gets ugly here again," I nervously said. "Oh and Jake, don't shoot until you're sure the person is already dead okay? We don't know how many survivors are still out there." "Don't worry I'll make sure of it," he assured me. "I don't have to tell you to aim high for the kill shot," I reminded him. "Definitely, headshots only," he responded. "Okay then, let's roll." We carried on down the streets of New York for hours. I was sure that the city had been quarantined by now by the Army and that we wouldn't be able to reach the border any time soon by foot. The scene was utter destruction with bodies littered all over the place like leftover scraps that the zombies had discarded. Finally we came across one of the local gun shops and decided to check it out. Unfortunately for us the store had already been looted of anything of great value. It was certainly expected but at least not everything had been taken. "Alright show me what we're working with Jake," I said

hopefully. "Looks like we've got one flashlight with an extra set of batteries," Jake told me. "Well that should help come nightfall, you can have it since I'm still carrying the most," I offered. "Think we should try and barricade ourselves in here Matt? Looks like there's an overcast outside today and plenty of shelves here to barricade with." "I'd say yes but there's no safe way out of here if they start to gather into another large group in front of the store," I reasoned. "I think we should keep going for now and look for any place that offers higher ground and better safety." "We'd better hurry if we're going to last long out here, it's more dangerous at night, so I've heard on TV at least," Jake cautioned. "I've got your back and you've got mine, we're not giving up no matter the odds," I reassured him. "I just hope we can get out of this city before too many of those freaks find us," Jake concluded with a look of despair.

We continued on as it started to rain. Now soaked, cold, and tired, we found ourselves searching for anything or anywhere that we could take shelter. "Hey you down there!" A man shouted while pointing a rifle towards us. "Don't shoot we're not infected!" I yelled as loud as I could. He seemed to hear me and waved me over towards his car shop. "Never thought I'd see anyone coming from that direction again, the name's Dennis and this here is my daughter Mandy," Dennis introduced. "Nice to meet you, I'm Matt and this is my friend Jake. We were hoping that we'd find someone soon. It's really starting to pour outside and it's getting late. Is it alright if we stay here for the night?" I asked. "Yeah I could use the extra help here as long as you two will help me with these barricades," Dennis offered. We talked for a while longer while boarding up the windows on the bottom floor and put the hammers and nails back into the tool chest when we finished. Turns out, Mandy was about our age in her twenties and Dennis had been working in his shop for a few years as one of the city's mechanics. He seemed like a nice enough fellow to be around. He carried a .40 caliber pistol with a couple of extra clips and a high-powered rifle he claimed he used to hunt animals with on vacation. The zombies wouldn't be much different, just slower and less alert to our presence than any deer that I've ever heard about. After we boarded up the whole downstairs it was dark out and the clock showed the time of a quarter past nine o'clock. Thunder and lightening started to rumble and flash a couple of miles away as distant groans of the undead started to get a little bit louder around us. We all started to feel tired but we couldn't sleep, not with them banging on the metal foundation downstairs. On top of that the couch wasn't too comfortable and I barely fit on it even with it all to myself. Jake didn't look any happier than me on an old chair across the room. I felt fairly safe and the lack of weight from the backpack was a big relief. Jake was still wearing his belt and had the flashlight right where he could reach it easily. Whenever the lightening flashed I could see outside the window more and more of the mindless walking dead slowly shuffling towards us. I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Matt how many of them do you see?" Jake whispered. "I'm not sure. Maybe a few dozen," I answered. He looked worried and asked me if the barricades would hold or not. I told him I didn't know. It didn't help his composure at all but he seemed to be holding it together for now.

A big crashing sound woke us all up as the bottom window had finally cracked and fell down from the weight of a bunch of zombies below. I sat up and started to feel around for my backpack. I pulled out the shotgun and loaded the shells into it. I wished there was much more ammo than what I was carrying. Jake turned on the flashlight and looked down the staircase. We had blocked off the stairs with the tool chest, which

bought us a bit of extra time. “Matt if anything happens to me make sure my daughter is safe. I don’t want her to die like those people out on the streets around here. Promise me please,” He pleaded with me. “I won’t let anything happen to her,” I said as Jake flashed his light on the increasingly dangerous situation downstairs. “Guys...” Jake stuttered. “Everyone lock and load!” Dennis ordered. I pumped the first shell into my shotgun and put the stock to my shoulder preparing myself for the recoil. Dennis handed his pistol over to Mandy and the ammunition for it while Jake clicked the hammer back on the revolver and held it towards the enemy. Last Dennis loaded his rifle and scoped in downstairs. “Keep that flashlight pointed at the ones that are closest Jake,” He told him. “I knew that there wouldn’t be enough light once the generator ran out of gas. It was just too dangerous to go searching for more out there.” The zombies had made it through the window and had reached the tool chest banging it with their fists and shaking it slowly out of position. “Fire at will!” Dennis shouted. Gunshots rang out as we all pulled the trigger simultaneously. The rifle was deafening as large bullets tore through more than one zombie at a time and cut a few of them in half while decapitating others. The pistols were not very accurate or effective on the group of bloodthirsty carnivores. We lit the whole room and staircase up with one shot after another dropping multiple corpses. I kept pumping and firing the twelve-gauge until I was empty. It took a few of them down but they seemed to be crawling back up and over the dead bodies. Jake shot down the small amount that had made it over the barricade. “That was too close,” Jake sighed with a sound of relief. “Everybody reload just to be sure when the others get inside,” I blurted out. They all obeyed, deciding it was the best choice of action at the time. I was empty so I pulled out the lighter and one of the Molotov cocktails from the backpack. I stepped down the stairs a few steps and then judged the angle of the throw. There wasn’t much extra room if I missed the toss but I managed and threw it over after lighting it. The bottle hit a zombie square in the chest and engulfed several others with the explosion. We all could see a little bit better downstairs how many there were. It was a harrowing sight. The flames lit up the faces so that we could see the eyes of the mindless monsters below. Blood covered the wall and various body parts had been piled up at the bottom of the stairs. “We’ve got to try and get to the border of the city and prove to the Army that we’re not infected,” Dennis stated. “If we can find a car that actually works out there then I’m sure we can make it.” Just then another wave of the infected pressed their way into the tool chest and tipped it over. It crashed down with a huge metallic clanging sound and the horde came shambling up towards us one by one. Jake unloaded on them firing all six shots in succession, dropping the same amount of zombies with headshots. They rolled backwards and tripped a few zombies, slowing them down. Another dozen were getting closer though and I decided it was best to throw another Molotov towards the back of them. It was almost as effective as the first bottle and burst into flames. Only three zombies caught on fire though. I grabbed another bottle and Dennis blew one of the zombies backwards with a perfectly placed shot right between the eyes. The remaining eight zombies of the group got into the room and Jake took a couple on at a time swinging with everything he had with his baseball bat. One of them was crushed downwards and the other one grabbed him trying to bite him. I pulled out the kitchen knife from my bag and stabbed it straight through the back of the skull saving my partner. He backed away and started to reload again. By this time the rest had gotten close and Dennis was rifle butting them backwards. Another zombie fell and rolled down the stairs.

I picked up my hammer and joined him in close quarters combat. Mandy rang out another shot next to us and hit one in the jaw. I swung and crunched down on the closest zombie in front of me. It died with a single hit luckily. Dennis was still fighting when more of them had gotten around the tool chest and started to ascend the staircase. I hit another and my hand slipped off the grip when I put too much power behind it. The hammer bounced down the stairs and I didn't feel like it was worth my life trying to get it this time around. Just in time Jake shot the zombie that I was aiming for and it fell with a thud next to my feet. Dennis couldn't hold the rest back and we didn't have any clear shots because he was too close to them. He got carried away beating them to death. "Dad!" Mandy cried out. It was too late. He had still been killing some of them when he got too close to a group of them and was bitten on the forearm and leg. He gave them both big hits to get them off of him and knocked some back while trying to climb back up the stairs. He was too badly injured and out of stamina to make it up to us. I grabbed the .40 caliber pistol as Mandy sat on her bed sobbing. Jake and I started blasting zombies on both sides of Dennis but there were too many of them. We had barely slowed down the entire horde. I had underestimated the amount of them earlier before I fell asleep.

Jake and I were now certain that Dennis was going to die no matter what we did to try and help him. I started concentrating fire on the rest of the zombies coming up towards us. My pistol clicked and I quickly grabbed the last clip for it. I had stopped another ten zombies before checking my remaining ammo. By now I knew there was no stopping them all. "Jake take Mandy and get the hell out of here! I'll be right behind you, just go!" I shouted to him. He opened up the window behind the main mattress and knocked out the screen as fast as he could with the bat. Fortunately there was a dumpster down below with bags of garbage already inside to cushion the fall. Jake let Mandy go first since she didn't have any weapons to defend herself. She dropped down safely and then he followed shortly after her. There was no time to slip through the window for me because it was too small and they were too close. I was out of options... I had already accepted my fate, but I knew that others had a much better chance of surviving with me by their side. I peered out the other window looking past the rain beading up heavily on the glass. Mandy was looking up and Jake was checking all around for the best way to escape from the ground below. I couldn't let them down; they both needed me. I turned the gun away from my head and shot the last bullet through the eye of the zombie in sight and then kicked the window solidly with my right leg. It cracked almost all the way and then I hit it once more with the pistol handle breaking it open. I grabbed my backpack throwing it below. Looking down I tossed the last Molotov in the room behind me while grabbing on to ledge shortening the fall. I knew that I would have certainly broken a leg if I had just tried to jump and roll the landing. I wasn't that agile anyway. I dropped down and picked up my backpack. The rest of the zombies had caught on fire up in the room and we were all happy to see them burn. "I've had enough death defying stunts for one night, let's just try to make it to the border by dawn," I said with a sense of humor disguising my fear. The group was quick to agree without any better options out on the street. We soon discovered there was still over a dozen zombies that had picked up our scent after we had managed to make it out alive. I gave Jake a thumb up for the bravery he had shown tonight and a job well done shooting zombies with style. I also noticed that Mandy was starting to stop crying and regain her survival instincts. I might not have known her very well but I decided to give her a compassionate hug anyway. "I'm sorry

about your dad Mandy but I'm glad that you made it. Thanks for your help back there," I supported her in a comforting voice. She looked at me and nodded. I could tell she appreciated everything we did for her despite her devastating loss.

We continued on for a few hours mainly ignoring the surrounding area of the city. As we pressed on I handed out water bottles and food to the three of us but we didn't stop moving. It was dangerous enough without stopping, as we had to dodge a few zombies while keeping up a brisk pace through the main roads. Unfortunately there were no working vehicles for miles. Mandy told us when we were getting close to the outskirts of the city. She knew the roads from back when she lived nearby. Another two hours had passed by and the sun was now starting to shine over the horizon. We were within sight of the border now. Tanks, jeeps, and lots of soldiers were lined up with extra guards in the watchtowers on both sides. Slowly approaching them without our weapons out we kept inching forward until one of the guards shouted over the loudspeaker, "This is a quarantined area. Do not approach the gate or you will be shot on sight. We will send someone over to examine you to make sure you are not infected. Hold your position until we allow you to cross the border." We were almost relieved at the very mention of them allowing us to cross over to the other side. Safety was within our grasp. But as we knew all too well, what seems like a good day can turn just as quickly into a bad one. The largest group of infected yet had caught our scent and were approaching from around the block. As soon as we found out we had been spotted by them, the soldier approaching us turned back towards the gate and ran as fast as he could back inside. We were trapped with the border sealed. "Quick get behind that car!" Jake yelled to us. We got down and took some cover behind an abandoned car that looked like it had been badly damaged from bullets and flying debris earlier. It didn't matter to me though as some protection from the horde and massive firepower was better than none. Jake checked his .38 just in case some of them would make it through. I grabbed his baseball bat; it was all I could use to defend myself.

The loud speaker sounded again and a direct order came through. "Open fire!" We dropped down even lower when the heavy artillery started to rain down in front of us. The torrential downpour of rain seemed like nothing compared to the onslaught now. More body parts took off in every direction and bullets from the carbines tore down the whole front line of zombies like they weren't even moving. A couple zombies strayed from the pack and reached us. While the soldiers were reloading it was now our chance to show everyone, including the zombies, what we were made of. Jake took the right side and I took the left. I swung for a homerun decapitating the rotting dead guy in front of me as Jake walked up and grabbed the growling woman by the throat and put the gun to her head for a quick kill. It seemed like the Army was going to have no trouble in dealing with the rest. They started firing again and ripping the infected to shreds with even more accuracy this time since the horde had moved a little bit closer. The tank shells were starting to get dangerously close now and the .50 caliber machine guns were firing with a deep roaring echo behind us. We didn't want to get too close but we started to slowly walk towards the gate while crouching to avoid the crossfire. Another five minutes later, we had survived yet again. The last twenty to thirty zombies had almost made it to the gate. When I turned around with my team I noticed we had gotten nearly right up against the fence. Lucky for us the soldiers didn't follow through on their promise to shoot us down if we moved closer to them. Under the circumstances they decided to just send a

couple of men this time and examine us. They cleared us as soon as the men said we were clean and we heard the fence close behind us. Victory at last would be ours. Was it really over? We couldn't believe we had finally made it. Jake was especially amazed as he doubted our chances from the beginning. There was no way I could have survived without him though. I knew he felt the same way, along with Mandy too.

There was no telling just how many zombies the army had taken down in the past couple of days alone. One thing was sure though. I had survived. I felt a sense of pride leading my two companions through insanity on the battlefield and safety across the border. All three of us had made it through the most grueling test we had ever known. We knew none of us would ever be the same again, but what didn't kill us had made us stronger. Later on we heard the Army talking about their orders to move themselves and any survivors on to the next checkpoint. We overheard one of the sergeants telling his men that the infected had broken through the border in another zone. There were reports of heavy casualties apparently. The men all geared up for the next battle. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach. I now realized this was just the beginning. Come hell or high water we wouldn't stop fighting until all of those undead freaks were dead, permanently.



# THE FACES OF DEATH

by Derek Santos

## CHAPTER I *A DECENT SHELTER*

“... OPC Philadelphia is gone.” Jim Mullen was turning the dial on his old radio, furiously trying to pick up military channels. He was a retired marine sergeant who fought in Vietnam. He said his squadmates nicknamed him “Pretty Boy” because of his dashing good looks and the fact that he always carried a comb in his holster, but all he had to show for it now was gray-patched black hair surrounding the bald crown of his head and a mustache clinging tight to his upper lip, but he was nice enough in small doses. He pretty much lived in the student lounge and liked to talk about old times and show off his scars from the war, but that was usually reserved for bedtime stories before the children went to bed.

Every day since he arrive, from the time he woke up until sundown he was constantly fidgeting with his shortwave radio, normally yielding little results, but he insisted that this was his way of keeping himself linked with the military effort somehow. His dedication to the Corps and to the country was something no one could question. He picked up snippets every now and then and Addie had a hard enough time understanding all the military jargon cutting in and out – but this one time, she knew exactly what it meant.

Jim’s eyes widened and he began yelling that he had found a channel. He began waving his arms wildly and yelling for everyone to join him in the lounge. It was a moderately sized lounge, just a big square with a uniform ledge jutting out of the walls that served as tabletops with chairs strewn about. But it was meant for maybe up to fifteen students to occupy for late-night studying, not for tens of people to crowd into. Men and women flooded in, huddling low around the radio in a formation that reminded Addie of rats swarming a single slice of bread. It was remarkably silent, she thought, except for the radio static and intermittent military chatter. But Addie had already heard all she needed to. Philadelphia was gone.

She stood up to leave, turning her body sideways, weaving and squeezing through the stream of people trying to get a closer listen. She had to lean her entire body into the large wooden doors to open them. She stood still for a moment at the mouth of the lounge with the sounds of the lounge growing fainter as the doors slowly crept closed.

Nearly five-hundred feet of narrow hallway and terrazzo flooring was sprawled in front of her. They were holed up in a pretty old building. It was commissioned by Villanova

University in 1962 as a seminary, but it was now a modern-day labyrinth of classrooms in the basement, a chapel and cafeteria above, and two more floors of dorm rooms.

Overall, it was a decent choice for a shelter. The residential rooms alone could house a little over four-hundred people. Each room was fifteen by eight and a half feet, with a student lounge at the very end of the hallway. The entire floor was shaped like a capital letter ‘T’, with stairwells on both ends that led to the floors below. Two communal shower rooms were on opposite sides of the hall at the halfway point, with running water to boot.

The rooms were in no way glamorous, boasting cinderblock walls and wood panel flooring, but they would have to suffice. At least each room had a window. There was hardly any furnishing except for a desk and a bed that came with each room. People didn’t complain, though. They were just happy to be alive. Another perk of living in St. Mary’s Hall was that it had its own power generator deep down in a room somewhere in the basement that no one was brave enough to enter. She heard about refugees living in the other ironically more modern dorms on the Main and South campuses who had no air conditioning, no caches of food, and who could operate only by natural lighting. Yes, Addie thought, this was a decent shelter.

## ***CHAPTER II***

### ***A DAY OF LASTS***

Addie never liked the idea of reused mattresses. She was worried about bedbugs and what she perceived to be the previous tenant's general lack of cleanliness. That was her major concern when she arrived nearly two months ago in April.

She couldn't believe she was accepted to Villanova's masters program for English. She was thankful for the education she had received from Orange County Community College but she didn't feel she was challenged enough as a student. An accelerated program at a prestigious private school offered her a chance to experience higher education and she was excited at the prospect of leaving home for the first time in her life.

Addie didn't have a car of her own so she went with her parents and older brother who drove the two hours and forty-five minutes south through various interstates to the city of Villanova, Pennsylvania on the western outskirts of Philadelphia. She was assigned to a single in St. Mary's Hall on West Campus on the girls-only top floor.

For the rest of the summer, she would call St. Mary's 338 home. It was right under the cross of the 'T', across from the resident assistant's room, right next to the bathroom which was adjacent to the stairs.

Thankfully she didn't bring much. All they needed to carry up the double-loop stairwell were toiletries, a small LCDTV, and suitcases full of clothes and various kinds of footwear.

"They really want me to use this bed?" Addie asked, twisting her face incredulously. She patted it a few times, each one resulting in the eruption of dust swirls which were made all the more visible by the beams of light peeking through the vertical blinds. Her mother put the TV down on the desk and turned to the naked mattress on the bed frame that had translucent particles floating about.

"I'm sure it's clean, sweetie, you're going to have a bed sheet, anyway."

Addie hinted a smile and sarcastically rolled her great, green eyes. "Whatever, mom. When I call home 'cause I'm being eaten alive by bedbugs, I won't say I told you so," she said, making her way to the door.

"Oh, that would be so tragic," her mom said. They shared a laugh together before Addie swung around the doorframe into the hallway towards the stairwell. The stairs

hugged the left side while the entire opposite wall was a stained-glass window depicting a thin bearded man surrounded by Latin words. Addie wasn't religious, but she found some comfort in walking up and down the staircase under the ever-watchful eyes of the stained-glass Jesus. In the parking lot outside she found her brother leaning against the car, texting on his phone. Addie took two of the suitcases from the trunk and began rolling them towards the building.

"Don't worry, Tom, I got it, thanks for offering," she said. He looked up from his phone for a moment and smiled. He clicked his tongue and nodded at his sister.

"Anytime, Add."

"Jerk," she said, letting a quick laugh escape her lips. Tom flipped his phone closed, grabbed the last luggage and shut the trunk. "Hey, wait up!" he said, chasing after her. Addie paused for a moment, brushing aside the light strands of auburn red hair that had blown across her face.

"Where's dad?" she asked.

"He's inside somewhere, said he had to use the bathroom. So I had to stand out here and make sure no one stole your clothes." Addie smiled and shook her head. They turned to make their way to the lobby.

"Thanks, Tom, for defending my clothes," she said, giving a quick glance around the empty parking lot.

"Sure thing," he quipped proudly.

Addie couldn't stop a thin smile from forming on her lips. "Loser," she said.

After finishing the move-in process, they went to Campus Corner, the fast-ish food restaurant literally on the corner of Villanova campus. What a clever name, Addie thought.

"What do you want, Addison? I hear the cheese steaks here are great," he said.

"Okay, sure I'll try that," she replied. The place reminded her of a Dairy Queen but slightly bigger. It was nearly three in the afternoon. The lunchtime conversation was as jovial as all Morgan family meals were. Tom claimed that the cheese steaks were the best he had ever eaten. Addie had never eaten a cheese steak before, but she felt obligated to try one since they were so close to Philadelphia.

Today was a day of firsts, but Addie could never have guessed it to be a day of lasts: the last time she would share a laugh with her mother; the last time her brother would tease her; the last time her father would order food for her. The last time the Morgan would eat as a family.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### *EVERYTHING IN THIS COUNTRY MUST*

Sara was curled up under the covers. She could hear the footsteps echoing down the hall. Everything echoed in these halls; they were so narrow, the acoustics were through the roof. It made rallying for floor meetings easy. It also created a wind tunnel that made doors prone to slamming, giving the impression that someone had accidentally discharged a firearm.

The lights flicked on and she could feel her pupils dilate. She looked at the door and saw Addie taking her designer boots off.

Sara sat up and rubbed her eye and smiled. “Hey,” she said. Addie was neatly putting her boots along the wall, lining it up with her other various shoes.

“Good morning,” she responded affectionately. Addie walked over to the far wall and collapsed into the beanbag chair beside the door and exhaled. She was smiling for some strange reason. Perhaps for a moment, she was able to forget the world, the worries... the crisis they all faced.

“So...” Sara was drawing circles in the blanket with her finger. “Mullen get anything this time?”

“Yeah,” Addie replied, staring at the ceiling. There was a noticeable pause as her smile slowly faded. She drew a long breath and closed her eyes. Sara sat up in the bed. She was interested now. Addie was normally talkative, bubbly and outspoken. To see her so reluctant was a rarity that could only mean something serious.

One, maybe two months ago, Sara had lost track of time since the whole thing broke out, Addie quickly became the anchor of St. Mary’s Hall’s third floor. Prior to the outbreak, it was the girls’ wing, and since Addie was there for summer class sessions, less than a quarter of the rooms were occupied at the time.

When the quarantine and nationwide curfew were put into effect, civilians were strongly urged to stay indoors. All classes had been cancelled indefinitely. News channels saw a resurgence in popularity among the students trying to find out what was happening. It was ostensibly an outbreak of *Encephalitis Lethargica*, an inflammation of the brain that affected the neurology of whoever was unfortunate enough to be infected. Many students joked it was going to evolve into a modern-day Black Death pandemic. Civilians were told not to panic, however, and that the curfew was just a precautionary measure to minimize the spread of the infection.

None of the students complained, though. It seemed like paradise: living on their own, basically rent-free, with no school and no worries. They would go to parties and hang out at other dorms and crash overnight because of the curfew. But then the announcement was made. FOX and MSNBC broke the news first. President Obama had officially declared martial law in New England and the Tri-state area.

National Guard units were being dispatched throughout major cities in each state. Outposts and guards were established at street corners up and down Lancaster Avenue—there was no way to get by without being seen. Now, the choice was clear. Stay indoors, regardless of where you were at the time, or risk being shot by military patrols.

There was a palpable tension everywhere in the building. Sara lived on Main Campus but at the time of the declaration she was in St. Mary's Hall on West Campus to get a hoagie from the famed sandwich station in 2<sup>nd</sup> Storey, the mini-market exclusive to the building. She was an undergrad, a senior education major trying to get extra credits so she could graduate early.

She met Addie in the ground floor atrium. Some people were playing pool, some people were telling stories at the round table, but Addie was sitting on one of the benches lining the wall reading Colum McCann's *Everything in This Country Must*. Reading when the world is ending, Sara thought. That was someone she could get along with.

When Addie realized Sara had no place to live, she told Sara, without hesitating in the slightest, that she could stay in 338. Over the next two weeks, the military presence began to dwindle. It appeared they were being called elsewhere for whatever reason. Yet, people were still afraid to go outside because martial law had not yet been repealed, and

St. Mary's had enough food stored to last for months. That's when the refugees started coming in. Every day, new faces popped up. Sometimes one, sometimes twelve, it varied. Since the third floor was already occupied by girls, it was agreed upon that girls and families among the incoming refugees would join them. Single men were assigned to the second floor.

Addie quickly became popular among the families. She, and Sara by association, had become the unofficial babysitters for every child on the floor. They would read stories to the children, organize games, and even bring them to the cafeteria in the afternoons for arts and crafts. She had natural instincts as a leader and never hesitated to speak her mind.

"Well, what is it?" Sara asked. "What'd Mullen pick up?"

"It was a very quick transmission," Addie started. "Philadelphia's been overrun." Sara's naturally empathetic eyes grew especially somber at the news. That's it, she thought. If the military lost Philadelphia, it was only a matter of time. The rest of the east coast would fall if it hadn't already. There would be no escape from the mindless horde – from the zombies.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### *THEY SAID A STORM WAS COMING*

Brandon was sitting at the end of one of the cafeteria tables, the gigantic room lit only by candles. The lights worked, but after sundown, it was candles or nothing. It was a precautionary measure against the things that wandered outside, especially since the cafeteria's windows were so large and relatively thin. It was ten o'clock but the cafeteria was open until midnight and was always serving food as long as it was open.

He had already finished his meal except for the last half of a granola bar, but he liked to be around other people, at least for the atmosphere. He didn't particularly like the gloomy feeling of his room, the musky lounge with the crazy old marine and his radio, and he definitely did not like the basement floor with the monotonous whirring of vending machines and eerie classrooms.

The cafeteria was normally full of people eating, even this late, and it was right next door to 2<sup>nd</sup> Storey which could be seen through the hole-in-the-wall design, although it was more of a giant-rectangle-in-the-wall. The activity and social interaction sometimes helped him to forget that his family was likely dead and that he was probably soon to follow. Strangely enough, he was more convinced of the latter; he only assumed his family was dead because he lost contact with them after the government declared country-wide martial law in late April.

That caused mass-panic more than the military's inability to stop the spread of the virus. They domineered satellites, radio towers, and anything else related to communication. Civilian devices were effectively rendered useless. Verizon, T-Mobile, AT&T—they were all ordered to shut down their services. Cellular phones, beepers, pagers, iPads: anything that was able to send any kind of message became nothing more than a paperweight.

Basically, if you were separated from your family when the military took over, chances are you would never see or hear from them again—at least, not until this plague was contained. Brandon was among those separated. He was a mechanical engineering major at Villanova who was home in Virginia for the summer, but decided to come up to Villanova the second week of April and help his first-year roommate Mike Calloway move in for his summer courses. It's the 18<sup>th</sup> of June now, a little over two months later, and Brandon's been here at St. Mary's the whole time.

He was scrolling through his text messages on his phone, slowly nibbling what was left of his granola bar. *dude did u hear about this fuckin disease? turn on the news its crazy. There was a clip earlier of this guy biting ppl in the street in raleigh lmao. Mom says hi, were going to see kick-ass, so ill txt u after were out.* That was the last contact he had with anyone in his family.

Brandon did turn on the news, and he did see the clip of the guy biting people in the street. Only now, there were countless more videos flooding in to all the major news networks. He thought it was funny at the time, but in hindsight it wasn't funny at all.

He would have gotten in his car and driven back home, but by the time anyone realized how dangerous this disease really was, martial law was already imposed across



the entire United States. Within hours of the declaration, every television channel in the nation was requisitioned by the military regime. They replaced them with a single universal channel that broadcast nothing except blocky white text on a black background. They were the new laws of the land. There were only three, but that was all they needed:

1. No person shall attempt *any* form of communication, electronic or otherwise.
2. No person shall be outdoors at any time. Military and government personnel will *shoot on sight*.
3. Major roads, highways and interstates are off-limits to civilians; non-military vehicles *will* be engaged and destroyed without warning.

When martial law only applied to the northeastern United States, people in the affected area were still able to go out during the day. Back then, the curfew began at sundown and ended at sunup. Some people fled the area to “free zones,” basically any place that wasn’t in the northeast. Some left to reunite with their family, some just to get away from the curfew. Others, perhaps those obsessed with end of the world scenarios, stocked up on food and prepared for the coming storm—they were the smart ones.

“Hey,” she said. Brandon turned and had to hide his awe. He had seen her a few times before, walking through the cafeteria with her friend, running laps in the gym, reading her green book downstairs by the pool tables where he played with his friends. But never this close.

Her eyes were huge, deep pupils of light gray with hints of celadon. Easily the most entrancing thing about her. Her long hair was straight and soft and shimmered in dancing candlelight, one moment brown and the next red. He felt nervous, excited, happy, all at the same time.

“...Hey,” he responded nervously.

“Could I borrow the pepper?” she asked politely. She smiled so genuinely, revealing two rows of perfectly white teeth.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” he said, grabbing the pepper shaker.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling again. Her hand brushed against his when she took the shaker. The friction with her skin was warm and smooth to the touch. He had just met

her but her beauty made him want to protect her, to hold her at night when vile things were happening outside; it seemed like it was the last thing worth living for.

“You’re Rob’s friend, right? Robert Dailey?” she asked as she sprinkled the black powder onto her scrambled eggs.

Brandon was stunned for a moment. “Rob, yeah,” he responded dully.

“I see you sometimes in his room,” she giggle coyly. “Me and Sara, she’s my friend, we call him DJ Rob ‘cause he’s always playing different music all the time.”

“Oh, yeah” he said, forcing a laugh, “is it that loud?” he asked jokingly.

“Well, these halls carry sound pretty well. And sometimes I go down to listen to Mullen and his radio.”

“Mullen,” he said. “That guy’s funny. But yeah, Rob’s got a ton of music on his computer from every genre, he sticks to one each day. It gives us some variety, I guess. Tomorrow is glam rock, I think.” She smiled when he said that and he felt a wave pass through his stomach.

“I might have to swing by... I haven’t heard Skid Row in a long time,” she responded softly.

“Oh, are you into that stuff?”

“Kinda... mostly because my dad would always play on the stereo when I was younger.” She paused for a moment and smiled again, but this time it was as if she was listening to her own personal joke. He was silent this whole time. He was looking at her, not quite aware that he was staring. “I haven’t heard from them since I moved here in April,” she said. The liveliness had been stripped completely from her voice. She was playing with what was left of her eggs, stabbing it with her fork. He didn’t know what to say.

“I... miss my family, too.” She lifted her head to look at him.

“Have you heard from them?” she asked, her eyes locking with his. Her pupils were like big grey disks. He shook his head slowly, unable to break his gaze.

“No... haven’t heard from them since April, either. After cell phones and wi-fi stopped working,” he said. She sighed as if she had lost her last chance in believing—in hoping.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. She glanced toward the windows on the far end of the cafeteria and sighed again. “I’m think I’m gonna go to sleep. It was really nice meeting you,” she said, ending with an inflection in her voice that suggested she was asking his name.

“Brandon,” he said. “Brandon Ross.” She smiled again, finally.

“Addison Morgan. You can call me Addie, though.”

“Cool, nice to meet you Addie.” She picked up her tray and motioned towards the wooden doors on the wall opposite the windows.

“See you later, Brandon.”

“See ya,” he waved. He watched her pass the desk with the register on it where people needed their card to be swiped to enter the cafeteria, open the doors and disappear into the incredibly long hallway with the high ceiling, marble walls and tiled floors. They were both in the same boat, he thought. Then again, every student stranded here was in the same boat.

He stood up and walked toward the ceiling-high vertical rectangle windows stopping inches from the glass and looked outside into the night. He saw the street between St. Mary’s and the student apartment complex, lined with inoperable street lamps and cars that hadn’t been moved in weeks. He watched the dozens of limp figures with probably hundreds more on the way, shrouded in the darkness. He wondered how many of them he had classes with and how they were forever doomed to roam in search of something. What a strange thing, he thought, that the only thing separating him from sure death at this point was an inch of glass.

## **CHAPTER V**

### ***QUARANTINE***

“So,” Sara said. “*Nothing* happened?” Addie shot her a look.

“*No*,” she responded sarcastically with a smirk. “We just hung out in Rob’s room for a little bit listening to music. That’s all.”

“That’s all,” echoed Sara with a tone of finality. “Okay.” There was a long moment of silence as the various other conversations on the rooftop inaudibly congealed

together. The rooftop was the only place that refugees could go for fresh air at any time of the day without being exposed to the undead hazard. Sara and Addie liked to come up and chat when it was cool outside, usually just after sundown so there was still some light out. They were sitting close to the edge on the north side of the building which was facing the rest of West campus which consisted of the newly built apartments and the main road that ran between them and St. Mary's. Although they'd been here for quite some time, it was still strange seeing no human activity. There were always people hanging out, students sitting on the curb waiting for shuttles to main campus, or studying under one of the many trees.

"He's a really cool guy," Addie blurted out, as if she thought Sara was still dwelling on it. Addie drew her knees up to her chest and perched her chin on top of them. "It's just that..." She hesitated for a moment. "This hardly seems like the time to look for romance."

Sara shifted her eyes to her friend and absorbed the words. "Or maybe it's the most appropriate time," she encouraged. Addie turned her head towards Sara, still perked on her knees. She smiled and drew her breath, but before she could say anything, she noticed some movement on the distant sidewalk below. There were dead zombies strewn about the lawns and the street and countless more still wandering about; movement wasn't out of the ordinary. The roof was for people-watching, but in this case one might call it zombie-watching. But this was different. The movement... it was swift and almost unnoticeable.

"Sara, look. Over there," Addie pointed. Sara whipped her head backwards and caught a fleeting glimpse of something, but it was too dark out to see clearly. Whatever it was, it disappeared quickly under the first floor roof extension just outside the pool table room below 2<sup>nd</sup> Storey.

"What the fu..." Her voice trailed off as she turned back to Addie. "What was that? I didn't get a good look," she said. It took her a moment to notice a look of sheer terror in Addie's eyes; something she hadn't seen the entire time they'd known each other. They sat frozen, staring at each other as panic and anxiety began to set in. Sara could feel her heart

begin to beat into her ribcage. Addie's eyes were restless, moving around as randomly as her thoughts seemed to be.

"Sara, you tell everyone on the roof about what we just saw. Organize them and follow me downstairs to help the seal-off. It—they might be trying to come in. Go!" she ordered. Her leadership instincts were kicking in.

"What about you?"

"I'll go warn everyone downstairs. Those... things might be trying to get in."

"Okay," Sara said, her adrenaline rushing. Addie started moving toward the door when Sara grabbed her by the wrist. "Be careful." Addie nodded, and bolted down the stairs. Sara turned and saw about two dozen people loitering on the rooftop, talking, stargazing or just getting some fresh air. None had been near the north side of the building, however, so they couldn't have seen what Sara and Addie saw. She cleared her throat and began to climb on top of one of the big vents.

"Excuse me, everyone," she said in a shy but elevated voice. Much to her surprise almost everyone turned to her. "Can you tell him," she pointed at a man with his headphones on. "Yeah, hello everyone. It has come to my attention, and Addie's also, that we may be in danger." Peoples' faces wrinkled in curiosity, they turned to each other and whispered in low voices.

"What do you mean?" "How do you know?" people began asking.

"Addie and I were sitting on the edge of the building," she pointed to the north side. "We saw something moving fast and it looked like it was trying to enter the pool room. Please, don't panic. Addie's already gone ahead to alert everyone else, but I need your help to spread the word and get everyone to the dorm floors and to seal them off." Much to her surprise, there was no hesitation or questioning; everyone knew the drill for a break-in and everyone assumed no one was perverse enough to cry wolf.

Sara descended the stairwell to the first floor. Others who were following her from the roof dispersed among other floors along the way to help spread the word of the threat. Sara emerged outside the entrance to the candle-lit cafeteria and found that people were still eating and whispering amongst themselves. She walked to the door on the opposite side of the cafeteria and peered through. There were people in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Storey tables also. She resolved to tell everyone

until she saw Addie appear from the staircase leading down to the pool room. They made eye contact and hurried toward each other.

“Hey, how’d you make out?” Addie asked, short of breath.

“I told everyone on the roof, they went to the other floors to help tell everyone. I told them to help seal off the third and fourth floors when everyone is up. There are some people in the cafeteria, too.”

“Okay, good, I went through the major areas of the building. Unless people are in the basement, this should be the last place,” Addie said looking around. “The pool room...”

“Was there anything?” Addie shook her head indifferently, her eyes still darting around the cafeteria. “Well, either way, we saw what we saw, we still have to make sure everyone is safe.”

“Yeah,” Addie said. “I just—”

She was interrupted by loud banging and screaming on the blue double-doors opposite the staircase; they led outside. Sara jumped and Addie spun around and let out a yelp. Other people at the tables had similar reactions; it was normally quiet and talk was a hushed whisper, so any startling noise was bound to make people jump.

The banging was relentless, but it was undoubtedly a human voice screaming to be let in. Addie approached the door, curious onlookers at her flanks, still apprehensive because of growing darkness outside and the lack of lighting inside. She could see through the narrow vertical slits of glass that it was definitely one of them. He was easy to distinguish because he just happened to be the only Asian refugee among them. Addie, who happened to be at the forefront of the group, quickly moved to the door and pushed it open. Some people shouted and grabbed at her in protest, but she moved too quickly and no one attempted to stop her.

She had barely cracked the left door open when the boy grabbed its edge and flung it wide open, violently forcing his way passed Addie. There was an audible ‘click’ as the magnet on the door contacted the magnetic lock on the adjacent wall. The crowd of people recoiled, afraid that she had let in one of the creatures outside.

Addie stumbled backwards and began to lose her balance. When she fell a looming figure came into focus, slumping towards her from the darkness outside. As it

shuffled inside, it began to release a moan that only grew in strength and terrifying loudness. The dancing candle flames illuminated its face and accentuated its ghastly features. It was gaunt, the skin a dark gray, hanging from flesh in some areas. There was a gaping hole where the abdomen should have been and it was lined with maggots. Its jaw was hanging from its head, clinging only by some thin strands of flesh.

Addie opened her mouth but nothing came out. The smell became quickly overwhelming—it was undeniably the smell of death. Sara was struck with something: terror, awe, incredulity. Regardless, she realized she had to do something, but before she could think to do anything, a large chunk of the creature’s forehead burst forward with incredible velocity causing matter to spew everywhere. Several more cracking sounds followed and sooner than she could discern what had happened the monster was lying prostrate at Addie’s feet, motionless. She ran to her friend and knelt next to her. When she got closer she looked at Addie, her face was contorted with fear and covered with splotches of crimson and gray-colored chunks. Sara looked up to the door and found herself staring down the suppressor on a gun barrel.

“Did any of it get in her mouth?” he demanded. “Her eyes, her nose?” The question didn’t even register as the same language for a moment—Sara was still dumbfounded.

“Answer me.” Sara looked to her friend once more. It looked like most of the blood and brain had landed in her hair and forehead, with some straying on her cheeks. Sara shook her head and looked back up to the man wielding the gun.

“No. I—I can’t be sure,” she stuttered, “but I don’t—I don’t think so.”

“Simmons,” came a voice from the darkness. “Stand down.”

“Sir,” he replied, lowering the gun. A form outfitted in blood-smeared camouflage stood over them as more began to emerge from beyond the door.

“Put her in quarantine,” the voice continued. “We can’t take any chances.”

## **CHAPTER VI**

### *STILL A CIVILIZATION*

“She hasn’t stopped shaking,” Sara said. Brandon was sitting across from her at the table right next to the door where it all happened. “They let me help clean her in the shower, but no one is allowed to see her.” Brandon’s hand was on his forehead, supporting its entire weight.

“What the fuck,” he said. “Bastards.”

“Well... I do feel safer with them here...” she started.

“We’ve been here for like, two months and haven’t had a single encounter. And now, these assholes show up and all of a sudden we have an attack. That’s bullshit, it’s their fault.”

“Brandon, you weren’t there...” she interjected. “If anything, we were lucky that they showed up when they did. Besides, it was Freddie’s fault... he knows no one is supposed to leave the building. If he wanted to smoke he could have gone to the roof where everyone else goes. Those are the rules.”

“Whatever,” Brandon said. He picked up a French fry but threw it back down onto his plate and pushed himself from the table. “I’m going to see if I can talk to her.”

“Wait, let me—Brandon, hold on!” she said, catching up to him. He made his way through the empty cafeteria, Sara in tow. It was strange seeing this place empty and it gave him the chills. They walked up the stairwell to the top floor and saw the two guards outside the public shower room.

“Hey,” Brandon said as he approached. Sara was hunched over trying to hide behind him. “I need to talk to her.”

“Sorry,” one of them replied. “No civilian contact is permitted. Orders.” The name tape above his right breast pocket read “SIMMONS.” The patch on his shoulder was bright red with a blue circle in the middle with the letters “AA,” and a curved banner above displayed “AIRBORNE.”

“Look, man,” Brandon pleaded, “I just wanna see how she’s doing.”

“We’re monitoring her. Now please, if I could ask you to return to your quarters.” Sara began tugging on him with all her might.

“Brandon, she’ll be fine. Let’s go, we’ll just come back later.”



“I want to talk to whoever is in charge,” Brandon blurted out. Sara’s eyes grew wider and shrunk again.

“Oh my God, Brandon, please—he’s just having a bad day,” she pleaded to Simmons, “let’s go Brandon.”

Simmons glanced over to the other sentry and smirked. He grabbed the receiver from the other’s pack and brought it to his mouth. “Sergeant Shepard, sir,” he began. “There’s a civilian who wants to speak with you.” They all waited in silence for a response.

“Send him,” came the voice from the radio.

“Sir,” Simmons responded. “Well,” he said to Brandon. “I guess he’ll be seeing you.” They had taken over Mullen’s lounge a floor down for the time being and converted it to their base of operations, which Mullen didn’t take too well. “Those fucking army pussies,” he had said, “kicking me out of my foxhole.” Brandon walked up to the two guards outside the lounge with Sara nervously standing behind him.

“Let him in,” came a voice from inside. Brandon entered, but Sara was kept outside. Shepard was leaning over a table with a large map of southeastern Pennsylvania sprawled across it. A marker had been taken to it; there were circles and scribbles all over it. “What did you want to speak to me about,” he asked sharply without raising his head.

“How long are you going to keep Addie in quarantine?”

“Is that her name?” he asked, nonchalantly running his finger along an invisible route on the map.

“Yes, it’s her fucking name. She’s not infected, let her go.”

“I admire your devotion, but we can’t take the chance,” he finally stood up straight and looked at his watch. “It’s been a little over an hour, we can’t know for sure until contact-plus-five. If she’s still fine, then we’ll be out of your hair. You don’t see it now, but we’re actually doing you a favor.”

“What do you mean?” Brandon questioned.

“Mullen’s orders,” Shepard said. Brandon was unable to hold back a brief fit of laughter.

“Old man Mullen?”

“No, not that delusional man we kicked out of here. Admiral Mullen, General of the Army. Sure there’s martial law, but we’re ordered to ensure the safety of any civilian outposts should we come across them. To make sure there’s still a civilization after this whole thing blows over.”

“So... that’s what the quarantine’s about?”

“We’re making sure she won’t turn. If she begins to show symptoms—fever, chills, vomiting, dementia—we’re going to have to kill her.” Brandon felt a weakness in his knees for a moment.

“If she’s fine, though...?”

“Then we release her and move on. The only reason we’re still here is because of Mullen’s order.”

Brandon walked out with a new understanding and some regret over how he had acted. He liked Addie, but what they were doing... it was for their own good.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### *THE FACES OF DEATH*

Addie was under the blanket with her knees curled into her chest. The central air had apparently malfunctioned so the temperature was dictated by the elements outside. It was an unusually cold June night. She asked Sara if she could sleep in the bed with her so the body heat would keep them both warm. Sara tried to make her smile by joking about bedbugs. But it wasn’t just for body heat. She was scared. The image of the monster standing over her, its head nearly exploding and raining down blood onto her face; it haunted her.

She had only been released for about thirty minutes. The soldiers were still here, they were still packing up their things to leave. Brandon had tried to help calm her down and cheer her up. Nothing worked, but she appreciated the gesture. She told him she was tired and he told her he’d come by the next day, but in reality she was wide awake.

The night was still; there was complete silence except for Sara’s slumbering inhales and exhales. She could still hear the creature moaning in her head and she shut

her eyes trying desperately to get rid of it. The moan slowly turned into a scream and eventually into a shriek. She shut her eyes even tighter and covered her ears, but it wasn't until Sara shifted in the bed and sat up that Addie realized that the shriek wasn't in her head.

From the crack under the door they saw the hallway lights turn on and feet running by.

"Sara," Addie said. There was a quivering in her voice. She gripped Sara's shoulders tightly and hid behind her.

"Addie, don't worry, I'm right here. Let me just see—"

"No," Addie begged. She was on the verge of tears. "Don't leave me, please!"

"Addie," Sara said. She took Addie's hand in her own. "I'm right here," she said calmly. "There are people outside, it's ok. We have to know what's happening." Addie slowly nodded, sniffing. Sara cracked the door open and saw the hall was empty. She peeked her head out and caught one of the dads running toward the stairs.

"Mr. DeWitt," she called out. He stopped and spun his head around, visibly in a hurry to go. "What's going on?"

"They're—those things. They're inside." Sara's mouth was hanging open and she could feel Addie's grip squeezing tighter around her hand.

"Why aren't we sealing the floors?" she asked, confused.

"It's too late," he said. "They're all over. No one knows how they got in. We need to get out, the apartments behind us are still human. We're trying to get over there." As soon as he finished speaking he began running down the stairs. Sara turned back to Addie and held her face.

"Addie, we have to go. We need to get out of here with the others." She didn't wait for Addie to acknowledge her; she grabbed her hand once again and they bolted from St. Mary's 338 toward the staircase on the opposite side of the building.

"We need to get to the cafeteria," Sara said, panting. "It's closer to the apartments." Addie didn't argue. She felt weak and would have fallen by now if it wasn't for Sara pulling her along. They shuffled down the staircase and came out by the

cafeteria. They darted across to the other side and entered the room where Addie's encounter happened. There were still specks of dry blood on the walls and the floor.

"Come on!" Sara said, pulling Addie with her to the doors. As Sara reached for the push-bar on the door, there was a noise behind them; the sound of a chair bumping against a table. Sara spun around, but Addie was too scared to look back. All she saw was the expression on Sara's face. She could tell it was the same face she had made only hours ago. That was all she needed to see. She heard a guttural sound, like someone being choked. Addie could practically feel it breathing on her, touching her. She shut her eyes and felt tears forming at the corners.

"Addie!" Sara shouted, her voice cracking, "We have to go!" As Addie was tugged toward the door, she pinched her eyes shut as tight as she could and felt the tears stream down her cheeks. Sara crashed into the door bars with her shoulder, swinging them open. There was a rush of cold night air that stung Addie to the bone when she suddenly bumped into a stationary Sara. Her eyes were still closed when she heard Sara produce the most terrifying scream that sent shocks up and down her spine.

"Addie!" Sara screamed. "Run!" Addie opened her eyes. Her vision was blurry with tears, but she could see a wall of slumping figures approaching them. She wiped her eyes and turned around. There were three monsters nearly upon her, grabbing at the sleeves of her shirt. A strange feeling overcame her at that moment. A feeling of... hopelessness... surrender... of content. She closed her eyes, resigned to her fate, and began thinking about the things she would be giving up on. Her mother, father, brother, the possibility of life after this outbreak, Sara, who was in dire need of her at the moment... Brandon.

Her eyes snapped back open and she saw the horrid, putrid faces of the dead. Suddenly, she didn't want to die anymore. She backed up until she was leaning against Sara.

"I don't want to die," Addie muttered helplessly. Their hands met and as they squeezed tighter, Addie thought that if she were to die, it would be okay if she was with Sara.

“We don’t have to,” Sara said. Before Addie could react, Sara had spun around, wrapped her arms around Addie’s waist and brought the both of them over the waist-high stone ledge, plummeting some twenty feet below to the steps parallel to the wall.

When she opened her eyes, everything was a blur: her memory, her vision, her surroundings. It was pitch black outside. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand but she still couldn’t see very well. When she looked at her hand again it was a crimson red. She tried to stand up but she couldn’t gather her feet. When she tried once more there was a sharp pain in her leg. She looked down and saw what looked like a bone protruding through the skin of her calf. The realization and pain set in at the same time as she clutched at her leg in agony. Sara, she thought. The pain went away for a moment as she turned over, frantically trying to scan the darkness. Sara was lying down not four feet away from her, face down on the concrete steps. There was a pool of blood under her head—it looked jet black but the moonlight showed slivers of maroon.

“Sara,” Addie whispered, pulling herself closer. She looked around and saw no signs of any of those monsters or movement. “Sara,” she struggled. She reached out to the motionless body of her friend and turned Sara over onto her back. She tried to focus on her chest—it wasn’t rising. She could see an exposed region of Sara’s skull above her temple, the skin sheared right off from the impact. Addie’s face wrinkled at the thought of life without Sara. Tears poured from her eyes and mixed with the blood covering her face. She reached out and ran her hand through Sara’s tangled hair. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry...” Her voice trailed off.

“Addie!” she heard someone call. “Addie, I’m coming!” She looked up but her vision was beginning to blur even more. All she saw was two figures running toward her from the apartments. She planted a kiss on her hand and placed it on Sara’s lips. She pulled herself up using the rail next to the steps and felt a sharp pain, but it wasn’t in her leg this time. It was somewhere on her shoulder. She grabbed at it with her left hand and when she looked at her fingers they were stained with a slightly off-color red. She grit her teeth and let out a painful sigh. That voice. Brandon was still alive, she thought.

“Addie,” he said. He grabbed her by the waist to hold her up. “Are you okay? I’m so sorry, I tried to find you when we evacuated. Where’s—” He glanced back at Sara. “I’m—I’m sorry... about Sara.” Addie looked at him while another man wrapped her arm around his neck. There was a tingling in her hands and feet, crawling up her arms and legs.

“The apartments are still good,” Brandon started.

“Bran...” Addie muttered, the pain on her face giving way to confusion.

“They have their own generator also, and there’s enough room for everyone.”

“Bran,” she said sharply. They stopped carrying her.

“What’s wrong, Addie?” he said.

“Can we sit down, for a second?”

“It’s too dangerous, the apartments are right there, we can rest in the lounge,” Brandon said.

She shook her head, the expression on her face was one of uncertainty.

“No, it’s just I feel really weak... and I—I can’t feel my hands anymore.”

# Last Echoes

by Christina

August 7<sup>th</sup>. The day the world ended.

They called it a sign from God. They named it a curse from hell. They brought out their crosses, their charms, their electric fences, stuck them in the front yards of rich clean houses. They paid men, and trained men, and told them, “Stand guard, for they are coming.” But when they came—bloody hands scratching gory runes into the new wood of the crosses, tearing holes into electric fences that kept only the first few hordes at bay—when they came, we left.

Paid men left their honor at the door and kept their money in deep pockets. Trained men dropped their honor at their posts, and turned, fleeing past the women with their children, who stood waiting in open-jawed horror at the churning tide of bodies.

We took for granted the mundane marvels of our age. We forgot what it was to toil for even something as simple as light. As simple as warm, clean water. As simple as hot meals.

And when the water no longer came when called at whim, and the meals gained no more warmth from a stove than from the warmth of our bodies, the last comfort, as familiar as the midday sun, vanished. Light. And when the light went out, so too did the electric fences die.

And then we had nothing but each other.

Carter

Regulate, they had said. What they had really meant was, *eliminate*. And those who went unaffected by the virus—or didn’t know that they already were—they were all too scared to cry out for liberty. And so when they built the shantytowns they called “Neighborhoods” right there on the edge of the bay at Liberty Park, New Jersey, the Lady herself watched on, and was silent.

That was before the mass quarantine, before the Liberty Neighborhood became a safety center for refugees escaping from New York City. And here we were, stuck on the other side of the Border, the nickname they gave to the electric fence that kept our side of the city—the side infested with undead—trapped by electric fences and by the barrels of weapons aimed at our heads.

My fiancé and I had been in the long queue of cars heading towards Liberty Park. The going was slow—the road was packed with people driving towards the Holland Tunnel, an underground highway that would lead us across the Hudson River. From there, we need only go south to Liberty Park, where we could leave the area by boat.

But on July 11<sup>th</sup>, the line stopped completely.

People got out of their cars. My fiancé glanced at me in apprehension.

“Stay in the car,” I told her gently. I brushed her hair quickly behind her ears, attempting to erase the nervous glint in her eyes.

I joined a confused circle that was beginning to gather on the side of the road. Meek questions, angry demands, and silent gazes all cried for answers.

Amidst the confusion, a man broke into the center of the circle. “You’re all wasting time. They will take no more of us through the tunnel.”

There was silence.

“What do you mean?” someone asked.

“They closed down the Border,” he spat. “There’s no way around. The only way left to go is back to where we came from. The electric fences? They’re not for the dead anymore. They’re for *us*. ”

“But why would they keep us out?” asked a woman at the back. “They were called to save us!”

The man hesitated. “They were called,” he acknowledged, but said no more on the subject. He cast a nervous glance around the circle, muttering under his breath. “Go back to where you came from. There’s nothing here for any of us.” He pushed through the crowd and headed back down the street, towards the Border, where the electric fences hummed.

And since there was nothing else to do, and no other choice to be had, we fetched our remaining family members and followed.

\*

Rachel and I left what little we had in the car. The valuable silverware, the scrapbooks, my collection of baseball cards—which I figured I could sell once we relocated—were all left to rot. The most valuable possessions to us now were food and water, which we stuffed into our backpacks where no one else could see.

We followed the crowd down Canal Street, until we met the twelve-foot high electric fence, backed by a wall of brick and closed off by two large armored doors.

Camped out in front of the wall of brick was what must have been hundreds of people, their slumped bodies huddled around each other, their belongings strewn out across the ground like children’s toys on the lawn. I looked at Rachel, searching her face.

In her eyes I saw a dead recognition, and in that moment I knew that she did not expect to live. I took her hand, and we found a place to the right of the mass of people.

My mind raced as we spread our jackets on the ground.

I didn’t know how much time we had until the outbreaks in the North reached here, but I had never anticipated that we’d be trapped with a river and a closed tunnel between us and Liberty Park.

I held out my arms and Rachel crawled into them. I cradled her against my chest, rocking silently and taking comfort in the familiar smell of her hair. We spent the rest of the day in each other’s arms. Before we went to bed, we took the thin throw blanket out of my red backpack. Crawling under, I found the peanut butter crackers out of the side pocket of my pack. We chewed silently, sandwiched between the blanket and our jackets.

We each had a drink from one of the bottled waters. And then we slept.

\*

The sky was black when we heard the screams. I threw the soft material of the throw blanket away from my body and leapt to my feet, searching the darkness. The street was lit only by light that came from the sign that hung above us. *Holland Tunnel*.



A round of uninterrupted shrieks rose up from somewhere down the street. A few people stepped forward, unsure of what to do. Rachel was at my side now, holding my arm with cold, sweating hands.

That's when we saw him, a middle-aged man dressed in a gray business suit, half running, half stumbling from out of the shadows. My first instinct led me to step forward to help, but Rachel caught my hand.

He stopped running and fell over, convulsing on the ground. On his back there was a woman, her hands around his neck. At first I thought he must have been carrying her to safety, that perhaps she was injured.

Then, teeth bared, she bit into his neck.

The supple flesh easily tore, revealing a dark hole where full veins pulsed. His screams quickly died into bubbling gurgles as black blood spurted onto the street.

We watched on in numb horror as the gruesome feast continued. Then, from out of the shadows, we saw the outlines of what must have been a hundred bodies, dragging their feet and shambling across the street. For a moment it was deadly silent, save for the scuffle of clothes against the pavement.

When the runners broke through, sprinting on weak limbs towards us, we all broke.

There was confusion. Turmoil. Chaos. Someone slammed into me, running at full speed, and I sprawled to the ground. I heard Rachel scream. Quickly I reoriented myself and found Rachel to the right of me, her hands cupped over her mouth as she cried out in terror.

"Rachel!" I cried, but she kept on screaming. I followed her gaze. A boy on the ground next to me was wrestling with a ragged figure who relentlessly grabbed at his hair, his eyes, his throat. It was like watching a wild animal, caught up in the heat of the moment, biting at whatever it could lay its mouth on.

Over the sounds of Rachel screams, I jumped to my feet. I grabbed the undead figure and flung it to the side. Its face was so decayed that, staring at its sunken features, I could not tell whether it had once belonged to a man or to a woman.

I turned back towards the boy, who lay shocked upon the ground. He must not have been more than sixteen.

"Are you hurt?" I asked him. He didn't register my question at first, and instead stared vacantly into my eyes as though he didn't understand. I leaned down and grabbed his shirt in urgency. "Are you hurt?" I shouted into his face.

"No," he said, finally understanding. We helped him to his feet, and I looked him over, just to make sure.

A particularly devastating scream sent us running.

On the right of the entrance to the Holland Tunnel there was a small apartment building. I realized how lucky we were to have secluded ourselves from the main group, for as I glanced back, all I could see was a mass of writhing bodies.

The entrance to building was a dark wooden door, inlaid with antique-looking panels. Rachel reached it first, racing up the steps. I glanced behind us. The mass of bodies was dwindling now, and I saw more stretched out upon the ground, limp and unmoving.

"Hurry, Rachel."

Rachel shook the door. "I can't, it's locked!"

I pushed past the boy as I flew up the steps. I tried the door, and it didn't open. A barricade?

I glanced to the side of the door, where I saw the windows raised only slightly above the ground. Rachel followed my gaze.

We ran down the steps and to the side, where I tried to pull the window up. "Damnit!" I yelled, trying the three other windows. They were all closed, probably locked from the inside.

"Carter!" Rachel cried, and I could detect the sense of urgency in her voice. I turned to the left, and I immediately regretted it. On nearly every one of the dead bodies there was a dark figure, feasting noisily. I realized that I could hear the sounds of feeding, so loud and so numerous that they drowned out the screams. I felt sick and turned away, but not before I registered the sight of a small group of what must have been five undead beginning to shamble towards us.

Beside me, the boy retched.

I searched the ground for anything I could get my hands on. Clothes, shoes, blankets. But nothing that could break a window.

Rachel screamed again.

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

And then I found it, a walking cane with a large cream-colored globe as the handle.

The window cracked on the first try. Then it broke. I jumped through first to clear away the glass, not caring if I was cut. I reached for Rachel, but she pushed the boy to me first. I grabbed his hands and nearly lost hold. He was sweaty, and cold as ice.

I pulled him in. "Rachel!" I said. My vision blurred as salt from my own sweat stung my eyes. I reached out blindly for her, straining to keep my eyes open, fighting the burn. I pulled her in just as three dead hands began pawing at the windowsill.

Rachel ran to the doorway, peering around the corner to make sure that the inside of the corridor was safe. "Help me!" I yelled to the boy, and together we lifted a file cabinet and wedged it into the hole of the window. I winced as I heard a sickening crunch, but tried not to think about what it might be.

I slumped to my knees, breathing heavily. My mind raced, but no coherent thoughts could fill it. I stared at my hands and realized how violently they were shaking. One of my hands bled where the glass must have cut through. Other than that, I seemed to be fine.

I glanced over at the boy. I wasn't the only one who shook.

I wiped my forehead on my sleeve. "I'm Carter," I said, reaching out my hand.

"Sam," breathed the boy. And then we started laughing.

I don't know why we laughed. Nothing was funny. It must have been the hysterics of the moment, all the fear and sickness finally catching up.

"They'll hear!" hissed Rachel, and we quieted. Sam and I got to our feet.

"You got anything?" I asked Sam.

"Any what?" he asked, confused.

"Anything. A kitchen knife, a screwdriver. Anything?"

He stared blankly at me, then seemed to remember something. "I have this," he said, handing over a green pocketknife. "I completely forgot about it."

The blade was still sharp.

“Let’s go.”

It was dark and silent in the corridor, and I found myself slinking down to match the atmosphere. We found the entrance hall, and even in the dark I could feel the comfort of the design. The ground was tiled a faded beige, and the wall bore the remnants of a dated flower pattern. I glanced at the door.

“It’s barricaded,” affirmed Rachel, gesturing at the chair propped under the doorknob.

I tested the chair to make sure it was still lodged securely underneath the handle. To my surprise, it shifted easily in my hand.

Which meant that someone had locked it.

“It might have been during the first evacuation,” Sam suggested.

“It might have,” I nodded. “But whoever left here wouldn’t have exited out some window—they would have left through the front door. So how would they have left a chair wedged under the knob? Whoever stayed,” I continued, “Or whoever came in later on—they didn’t know how to do this properly.”

It was better to be careful, and I knew that before I could relax I’d have to search all the rooms. I repositioned the chair and jammed it beneath the doorknob, then tested to make sure that it was secured. On the floor there was a wedge to keep the door stopped, so I shoved it under the crack as best I could. Finally, we dragged over a sturdy table and propped it up against the door.

“That’ll have to do for now,” I breathed, wiping my hands on my jeans.

We went upstairs to the fourth floor. I went first, and at every creak of the old wooden stairs I froze, knife poised out in front of me. On the way to the third floor, I thought I heard a few soft thumps, as though someone was moving around above me. But I ignored it, wanting to get Rachel and Sam to a safe room first.

On the fourth floor, I did check all the rooms. No one was there. Everything was abandoned. I searched for any nonperishable food items, and didn’t find much of the easy-to-carry stuff. However, I did find a lot of cans. Soups, spaghetti, and tons of cupped noodles. Looks like people had been hoarding at the first hint of trouble.

I picked up a few cans and a box of noodles and took them to our corner room. We’d chosen one that overlooked both the Holland Tunnel and Canal Street, where the first hordes had come from. I closed the door and locked it.

Rachel lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. I could only imagine what she was thinking.

Sam’s head poked out the window. I could hear the faint sound of the undead feast still floating up from the street. Maybe Rachel had been listening to it. I pulled him away and closed the window. We stared at each other for a moment.

“How long have you been here, Sam?” I asked him. “How long have you been waiting?”

He shrugged. “Since the end of May, or the beginning of June. I lost track of time.”

“And the army—they’ve been here the whole time?”

“Since they set up the Border months ago. Why?”

I went over to the western window and opened it. Sticking my head out, I looked down. I could see the electric fence, which still hummed vibrantly. Past that, there was darkness.

And then I saw a light, moving back and forth, pacing. It was so dim that had I pulled my gaze away one second sooner I might not have noticed it. But no, there it was.

There was an armed guard patrolling.

And if there was an armed guard indifferently pacing back and forth despite the screams I could still faintly hear—and I was sure he could hear them, too—then that meant that the army had left us to die.

I closed the window and turned away. Sam was looking at me, searching my face. But I only had eyes for Rachel, who was curled up into a little ball on the bed, her hands clamped firmly over her ears. I went to her and curled around her. We lay like that through the night, with my hand gently stroking her hair.

Sam, his eyes trained on the window, rocked back and forth on the couch.

\*

When morning light came filtering through the dusty window, I found that I was the last to wake. Sam had been busy. He'd been searching the room and had come up with a collection of household items we could use as weapons: kitchen knives, a rusty hammer, a toolbox full of screwdrivers, and a wooden baseball bat.

I picked up the bat.

"I found this, too," said Sam. He pulled a handgun out of his back pocket.

"Looks like people weren't hoarding just food," I said. He handed me the handgun and rounds, and I loaded it while Sam watched. "Is there another one for you?"

Sam looked down. "No. I don't think I could use it anyway."

I put my hand on Sam's shoulder. "Sam, if something happens to me, you take this gun and you use it. These aren't human. They aren't people. You use it, and don't you care about who it is you're shooting. It's either their death or your life." I squeezed his shoulder reassuringly to take away the harshness of my words. "Remember that."

Sam nodded.

We spent the rest of the day eating and watching the window. I don't think any of us wanted to search the building. We didn't want to leave this room, which offered safety and comfort.

The noodles were slightly stale, but still good. Sam liked the spaghetti, but Rachel would eat nothing. I got her to drink a bit of water, but that was it.

When the sun started setting, I looked out at the office building across the way. A few flickering lights burned in the windows. So, some had survived. Down in the street, about fifty shamblers aimlessly roamed across a pavement stained with blood.

I snapped back into reality. We needed to search the apartments. Especially that third floor.

I picked up my bat and Sam grabbed a large kitchen knife. The handgun was tucked safely into my belt, all fifteen rounds ready to shoot.

I told Rachel to scream if she needed help, but I don't know if she heard me. She was still lying on the bed when we left.

I knew for sure there was someone on the third floor, so Sam and I made our way down the stairs. I held the bat high, ready to swing.

All the doors were closed, except for one down the hall, haloed in light coming in from the window. We edged towards it. A few feet away from the entrance, a man's

silhouette filled up the frame. At first I couldn't see him, but as my eyes adjusted, I raised my bat warily.

"Sam," said the man.

Sam stepped forward and laid his hand on my arm. "It's okay," he said to me. "He won't hurt us."

I lowered the bat, but kept my arms tensed and ready.

The man we'd followed from the line of cars, the one who'd told us to leave—that's who'd made the scuffling sounds on the third floor. He didn't seem completely right in the head a few days ago, and I doubted he was any better now.

"Is there anyone else here?" Sam asked.

"Tucker family on the first floor. You know 'em. Two kids and their old granny."

Sam glanced at me. "I'm going downstairs. She was kind to me when I first came." When I put my hand on his shoulder, he added, "I'll be careful."

I nodded. I waited until Sam's footsteps could no longer be heard on the stairs. Then I stared expectantly at the man in the doorway.

He turned and went back inside. I followed him, and he gestured for me to join him around the controlled fire he had started in the middle of the room, nearest the window. The fireplace remained on the opposite side, cold and untouched, a testament to this man's state of mind.

"They've been waiting here for weeks," he said, his voice hoarse and dead.

"They. Not you?"

He smiled knowingly, as though he had remembered a private joke. "I've been waiting too, friend. But for something else entirely."

"For what?" I asked.

The man piled a few old rags onto the fire. He looked at me from below haunted eyelashes, the warm glow highlighting the pores on his face and the way his beard grew, scraggly and unkempt, up the side of his cheeks.

"Death," he whispered, and there was the hint of a smile on his lips.

\*

*"So this is what we've created. This is what we've done."*

*"We did what was desired of us."*

*A sigh. "Did you extract the last vial of blood?"*

*"I did."*

*"Did you remember to kill him afterwards?"*

*"Did I forget? Does a man forget how to ride a bike?" He pulled the vial from his pockets and held it up to the light. "I might forget what I did at this same time yesterday. I might forget what I ate for breakfast this morning, if I had anything at all. I might even forget this conversation five minutes from now. But one thing I know," he added, laughing as he placed the vial on the desk, "One thing I know I will never forget is how to kill a man."*

*Dr. William Entry was left alone. He stared out the window into the darkness, then inclined his head towards the desk. In slow reverence and dread he moved to stand behind the office chair, taking the vial with gentle fingers into his shadowed hand. Staring at the glass, he saw his own image reflected there, colored red.*

*“The truest form of Martial Law,” he breathed, twirling it between his thumb and forefinger. “Control that begins not in the streets, nor with guns, but in the cells of a man’s own body.”*

*He pressed a button. “Janice,” he voiced. “Call the White House. Tell them we have found the cure.”*

William Entry woke with a gasp, his hands clenched as though he were still holding the glinting red vial. The last of the fire was still burning. It was not a cold night, but he shivered in the darkness. Guilt welled up inside him, deep and suffocating. He stood up, went up the stairs, and knocked on the corner door. Carter opened it, and the doctor beckoned him outside. When the door closed shut, William Entry began to weep.

Carter watched on silently, unsure of what to do. When Entry spoke, he listened.

\*

“I did it,” sobbed Entry. “It was my team—my team, so small and hidden from public knowledge—that found the cure to the altered virus, the new Spanish Influenza! We didn’t know,” he cried, staring into my eyes, as though he were trying to convince me. “We didn’t, I swear it!”

“You didn’t know,” I said. He was losing it. And I was the one on the other end of his grabbing hands. I tried to disentangle myself from them. “You didn’t know.”

But he wouldn’t let go. “No, listen!” he urged. “The government wanted us to create it, so that they might come back later and insist upon vaccinations! They wanted to pass laws to ensure more control over the people! And on top of that,” he laughed gently, “On top of that, we gave them the Anti-Body. Not the antibody, not the defense to the virus. But the Anti-*Body*. The virus which would turn a man’s mind into a robot, a running, living system that would take and follow orders! And we, hidden away from the world and the media—we also gave them the cure. But it backfired,” he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Someone tampered with it. It began to mutate so quickly that we couldn’t keep up. We couldn’t formulate a cure for every stage. The virus was *intelligent*. And now, this!”

He gasped for air as he recalled information. “Out there,” he breathed. “Out there is a hundred strains of the virus, and each wave of undead represents a different stage. During the first stage of the virus, the subjects were hungry. Ravenous. They had the urge to bite, to feast, to feed. On everything! Like little children, they could keep nothing out of their mouths. They would gnaw on their own hands and we could not stop them. When the virus mutated again, we ran out of subjects. They were going to send more; but in his eagerness the director brought his daughter into the lab, and in his cruelty he gave her the virus through a filled syringe. I’m certain it was he who had tampered with the virus. He was brilliant, but never completely sane. We were all cruel, for by that point we knew the consequences of what we had done; but we would never willingly alter a *child*! He, though—he left her in a room with her little puppy, and told her to kill it.”

Here his voice broke. “At first the animal ran to her, prancing around her feet. It adored her. As it whimpered, she shred it to pieces. Tears streaked down her face as she cried out in horror. ‘I’m sorry,’ she kept saying. ‘I’m sorry.’ She was trapped *in her own body*.”

He looked at the ground, then back up at me. His blue eyes bore fissures into my soul. "After the incident with the girl, I wanted to go to the media. So they left me here to die. I had no queue number, no way to get back over the Border. They had their replacements," he spat bitterly.

Then he slumped to the floor, his head between his knees.

I stood in silent shock, and he sat in silence, until his voice broke my numb mind.

"Give it to me," he said.

"Give what?" I asked. But I knew what he was asking for.

He gestured tiredly to my waist. "You know you've got a gun. I know you've got a gun."

I put a protective hand on the weapon, feeling the cold metal pressed against my hand. "No."

"Please," he whispered.

"No. It's a wasted bullet."

"I'll open the door," he threatened. "The children are on the first floor."

"You wouldn't do that," I said. "No one with enough guilt to ask for a gun would come threatening to die with more blood on his hands."

"Please," he said. His eyes looked up at me, blue and steady. This was not the gaze of a man whose desperation ran its course by the end of the night. This was the gaze of a man who couldn't live with himself. A man who had made his choice.

So I gave him the gun.

"Do it on the third floor," I said as gently as I could. "I don't want the children to see."

And then I went back inside.

In the morning, I went down to the third floor and took the gun back. I cleaned it, and made sure there were fourteen rounds left. There were.

I closed the door, and locked it as I left.

\*

We were all silent as we watched our loved ones wither. I watched on quietly as my fiancé grew thinner as time passed, her once supple, strong legs now straining to carry her own weight. I sat in silence as her once smooth skin began to become harsh, hot to the touch, though her eyes still pleaded for the coolness of my hand.

We grew tired of canned goods and stale, dry food. At least the water was still working, and we kept ourselves hydrated and clean.

I don't know how much time passed.

Sam and I had found a way to the roof by an old staircase that was disguised as a closet. It had become a habit to call down, hoping that that one of the guards would answer our pleas for help. When we saw a guard shoot a man for trying to lower himself onto the other side of the electric fence, we gave up.

We stood on the roof some nights, looking up towards the windows on the opposite building, hoping for some kind of contact. Sometimes, people would come to the windows, but they never answered our calls. They never waved back.

A couple of times, we watched helplessly as someone opened a window, flinging himself out into the open air, trying to make it over the fence. No one ever did.

Weeks went by in silence. We grew to know the Tucker family. Sarah had found her cane on the first floor, in the room we'd sealed with the file cabinets. Sturdily built, it served her even after I broke the thick window glass. Her two grandchildren, Amy and Eric, eight and ten years old, did their best to help her around. They were fascinated with Rachel, who woke out of her listless stupors whenever they came upstairs.

No one asked about the doctor. I think they all knew.

Time passed, and I bore it all silently. Rachel's weakening body, her tired mind. Sam's cheerful face was paler, since we spent most of the time inside.

But the time comes, will always come, when the silence builds up in a man's soul, screaming in protest at the burdensome chains wrapped around his heart like a volcano near to erupt.

And so, when I saw her—she who was to be my wife—beginning to succumb, to die, I knew that I could stand no more. As we watched each other become weaker, we began to offer up our own strength. And when I offered my arm to old Sarah, I realized that even in such a short time, I had begun to love her. I loved her, and her two grandchildren. And I loved Sam, too, as though he were my brother. And I knew that they loved Rachel, for they held her gently when her mind began to yield. For that, I loved them even more.

Each of us was a thread, hearts as strong as the silk of the golden spider's cord. As we linked together, one about the other, creating a tapestry designed to hold as one, we merged, and began to forge the chain of something stronger than steel.

Stronger than steel. For even steel changes shape, heated and cooled, mastered by the quality of one who knows how to work it. But we sat unchanged, unmoved there under the August moon, held steadfast only by the quality of our own hands, moved to courage by the shape of our own souls.

\*

One morning in August, Sam and I climbed to the roof. Immediately I realized something was different. "Do you hear that?" I asked Sam.

"Hear what?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said, my heart beginning to leap. "Nothing." I leaned over the side of the roof, my ear cocked for the familiar hum that had become as normal to us as the sound of the waiting dead.

"The fence is off," breathed Sam. "Carter, it's off!"

We both stared down at the Holland Tunnel, and there were no guards there. During the night, they had left.

"But why would they leave?" I wondered to myself.

"Who cares," cried Sam. "It's off! Carter, we can get to Liberty Park! We can!" He took off down the stairs, shouting to the others. I stayed on the roof, hoping someone in the building across the street would come to the window. But someone already was, and she stood directly across on the fourth floor. She'd seen Sam jumping about.

I pointed to the fence. She shrugged, not knowing what I meant. I pointed to the fence again, and then slit my hand across my throat. Then I repeated the gesture.

"It's off?" she mouthed, and I think she was afraid to call to me in the silence of the morning. I nodded, and she gave me a smile and a thumbs-up.



Satisfied, I went downstairs. Sam had already rounded up Sarah and the children. Rachel was standing in the doorway of our room. “The water’s off,” she said. “Everything’s off.”

“It’s time,” I said. She understood, and handed me my pack.

\*

We lowered ourselves out of the second story window, onto the brick wall with the electric fence on both sides. With no guns pointed at our heads, we were able to safely make it down to the tunnel entrance. I made sure to unbolt the armored doors, just in case anyone was able to make it from the office building to the fence.

It was dark. Everything was off—the electricity, the water. We had light, so that wasn’t a problem. Sam pulled a flashlight from one of the backpacks we’d found in the building. I had matches in my pocket.

It was dark and quiet. The entire tunnel was empty, cleared of cars and military personnel.

We made our way in silence.

\*

It was the last fifty feet, and we could see light up ahead. Old Sarah was tired, limping on her cane. Amy and Eric propped her up, but still I knew we would need to rest soon. Rachel and Sam trudged ahead.

I heard a sound behind us, the sound of footsteps pounding on the ground. I turned and saw two young men gasping as they ran toward us. “We got through,” they yelled, panting as they came up to us. “The others didn’t make it. We couldn’t close the doors!”

I stared at them. I had left the doors unbolted.

“There are runners,” one panted, his hands on his knees.

I glanced at Rachel. “Run!” I yelled.

We ran as fast as our slowest runners could. Amy and Eric were slow, but not as slow as Sarah. The two men ran ahead.

About fifteen feet to the exit, Sam called out to me. “Carter! Gas!”

I sniffed the air. Sure enough, there was a gas leak. I’d kept the matches in my hand, just in case the battery on the flashlight ran out. But I couldn’t use them now. If we didn’t hurry, we’d suffocate.

Behind us, I began to hear the sound of scrapes.

“Hurry,” I whispered to Sarah. “Try and hurry.”

She panted in reply.

We made it to the entrance as the runners came into view. We made the climb up to the street, but I could hear the echoing steps coming from the tunnel.

We wouldn’t make it. I knew that much. With Sarah and the children holding us back, there was no way we’d make it out alive. And we certainly weren’t going to leave them. Not now.

I shared a glance with Rachel, and she looked into my eyes with such love that I almost wept. When I looked back at Sarah, her eyes were on my face, studying me.

“You’re a good man, Carter,” she said, smiling her wrinkled smile, reaching up to cup my cheek. “You take care of them, my Amy and Eric.”

I stared at her, stunned as she pried the matches from my hand. She left her cane with me, stumbling down, back to the darkness of the entrance to the tunnel. Rachel tugged on me, and pulled me away before I could understand.

She pulled me over the rise, and we staggered down the street.

We fell as the ground trembled at the explosion.

\*

We made it to Liberty Park. I was angry the whole way. Angry with myself, with Rachel for pulling me away. Angry with Sam for being with the children when he could have helped me with Sarah. And angry with the two men, who left us when we needed them, when I was the one who had saved their lives by leaving those doors unbolted. They didn’t know that, of course. But I did. And I hated them for it.

“She wanted it, Carter,” said Rachel, who seemed to be the only one who understood. “She wanted us to live. We have her to thank for our lives. And Sam, Amy, and Eric are safe.”

But I was angry. I would always, always be angry.

Seth

I remember that day better than the days that came after. Just like how, moments after waking, you might remember the climax of a nightmare; but wait a few more moments and it already starts to fade. Everything felt blurry and unclear. My senses were abnormally dull and sluggish—when had that happened? Was it after the first round of bombings, which blew the houses, the apartments, and the people inside into tiny bits, their gruesome remains becoming no more distinguishable than the shrapnel which killed those who stood frozen on the sidewalks? Was it after the second round, when I watched in horror through the trees, scrambling out of my car to see black birds with government wings dropping out of the sky like the arrows of a vengeful god? No, I reflected. It must have been the third time, when I watched with my left hand braced on the driver’s seat windows of the van, thinking with almost callous numbness how beautifully the orange and red flames licked at the midnight sky, knowing deep down that the intricate patterns traced by the dancing fire had probably traced patterns in my parents’ bodies as well.

I lay in bed in the early dark of the morning hours, staring into the sky and wondering. They were supposed to be safe, there on the protected side of the Border.

After the bombings, it seemed likely that the people at Liberty Park were the only ones left.

“ . . . casualties ranging from a hundred thousand . . . ”

I could hear the plastic voice of the news reporter broadcasting through our portable radio.

“ . . . can’t assess damages . . . government blocks roadways. . . . safety of the American people . . . president stands firm. . . cure found soon.”

I practically ripped my sleeping bag as I scrambled to my feet. Everyone around the campfire watched me in dim confusion as I stomped over and hit the switch.

“What the hell?” cried Devin, jumping to his feet. “We need to listen to that!”

“I’m tired of hearing the same thing over and over again! They don’t tell us anything new!”

Devin pointed his finger at me from across the fire. “Until we know when they reopen the roads, we can’t go home, and none of us will know who, if anyone, survived! Cells don’t work. You know that!”

I felt anger erupt within me, but as soon as it sparked, it died, and I stared at him in silence.

“Don’t you give a damn about your family?” he shouted at the top of his voice. I watched spit fly from his mouth like dewdrops and disappear, sizzling, into the fire.

“Don’t you give a damn about your friends?”

Jon stepped forth and placed his hand on Devin’s shoulder. “He didn’t mean anything. Seth cares about his family and friends, just like the rest of us.” He turned a steely eye towards me, waiting.

The fire drew sharp lines upon Devin’s face, highlighting his clenched jaw and tense muscles. He was trying to keep cool. So I conceded.

“Look,” I said, tiredness creeping into my voice. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for flipping the switch. But what’s the point? They won’t *tell* us anything.”

I looked into the eyes of each and every person around the fire. I settled at last upon Jon’s cold, steel gaze. “We need to start thinking long-term.”

“What are you saying?” asked blue-eyed Johanna. “Are you saying--?”

“—That it might be days, even weeks, until they let us through? Yes,” I said firmly. “That’s what I’m saying.”

But I didn’t want to voice what was really on my mind. Not to Johanna. I felt her gaze linger on my face as I looked away.

The truth was, I’d already let go of thoughts of home. If the government was sending out pilots to commit to bombing one of its own cities, then these Deadwalkers were a bigger problem than our trusty officials were making them out to be. No, this wouldn’t be over ‘soon,’ as the president had said.

“So what do you suggest?” challenged Devin.

I turned on him, and was nearly surprised at the conviction in my own voice. “Am I the only one who saw the city go up in flames? Did I imagine it? Or was there nothing left by the end of the night!”

There was something else, too. But I didn’t mention it.

Johanna did. “He’s right,” she said quietly, looking up at everyone from her seat around the fire. “You know what we saw when we went back after the bombing. You all know why Seth turned us around.”

And as I looked around the fire at the empty faces, I knew that they remembered.

After the bombing, we had jumped in the van and had attempted to make our way back towards the city. But something caught our eye, and we stopped along the shoreline. As we stared out over the bay, standing in the cool sand in the shade of smoke so thick that it blocked out the sun, we saw boats escaping out over the water, heading swiftly on to the shores of Ellis Island. We cheered at first, hopeful. But when Jon took out a pair of

binoculars out of the back of the van, we knew from his tight lips that something wasn't right. When the binoculars got around to me, I saw what had made the others silent.

There were boats cruising towards Ellis Island, and there were people on them.

But none of them were civilians.

As I turned the eye of the lens towards the shore, I felt the stiffness of the air around me, as the others had already seen what I was now looking for. There along the line where the water met the bay, where the waves lapped at the vessels in silent defiance to their measured weight, I watched as a man held on to a boat, his mouth open in defiance. He gestured back towards the shore, back towards a huddled group, separated from the rest of the squirming crowd.

Two children, a teenager, and a woman.

I could imagine the anger in his screams, for the veins on his neck stood out like steel rods against his skin. I couldn't make out what he was saying at first, but then I understood. He wanted them to save his family.

At first the military personnel tried to pry his hands free. Then they grated on his fingers with their heavy black boots. When their boots and his hands came away bloodied, he still clung tight.

So they shot him in the head.

His body fell limp into the water, where I was sure a pool of blood had formed around his lifeless figure. For I watched as a group of two or three undead pushed their way through the screaming lines, searching for the owner of the freshly spilled blood. They flung themselves into the water, limbs dancing like puppets, tripping over each other as they grappled for rights to the body. They could not swim, and so they sank, bringing a fresh wave of dead to follow their trail into the water.

The vessel escaped safely across the bay.

And the man's last echoes floated as a mangled, half-eaten body out into the water, where a group of seagulls began to amass, picking at the flesh.

I hoped it floated right to the shores of Ellis Island.

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